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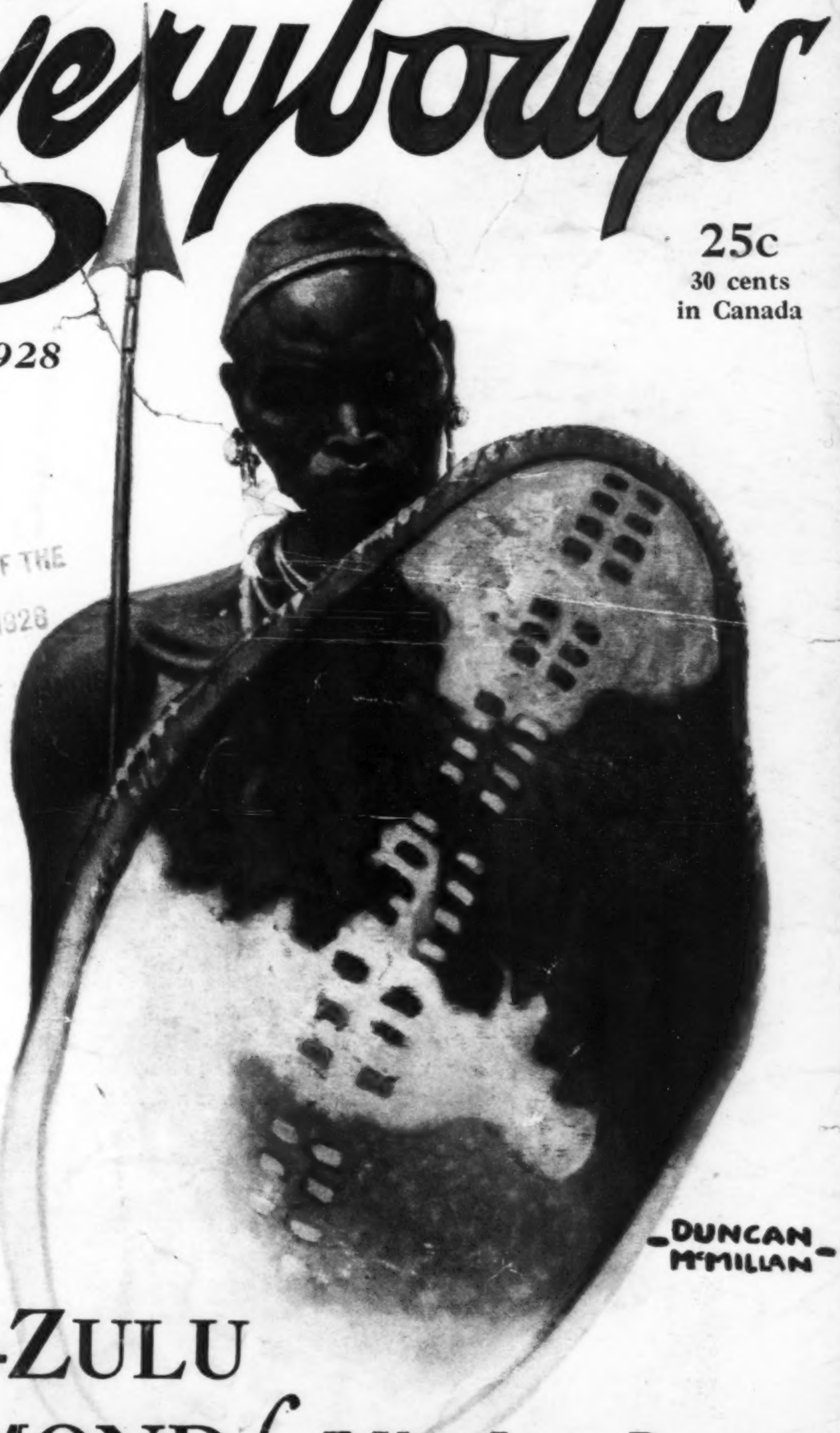

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WILLIAM CORCORAN
Editor

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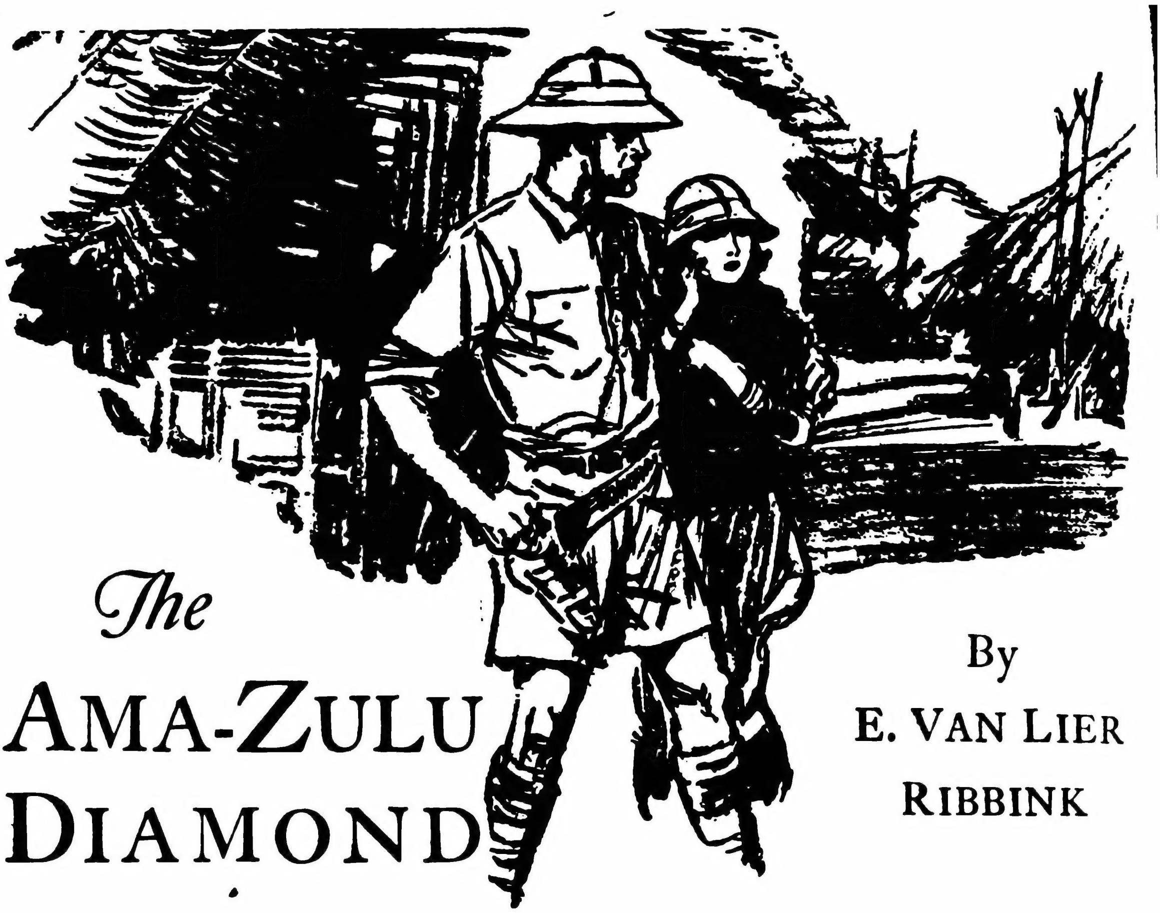


The AMA-ZULU DIAMOND

By

E. VAN LIER RIBBINK

CHAPTER I

A DANGEROUS MISSION

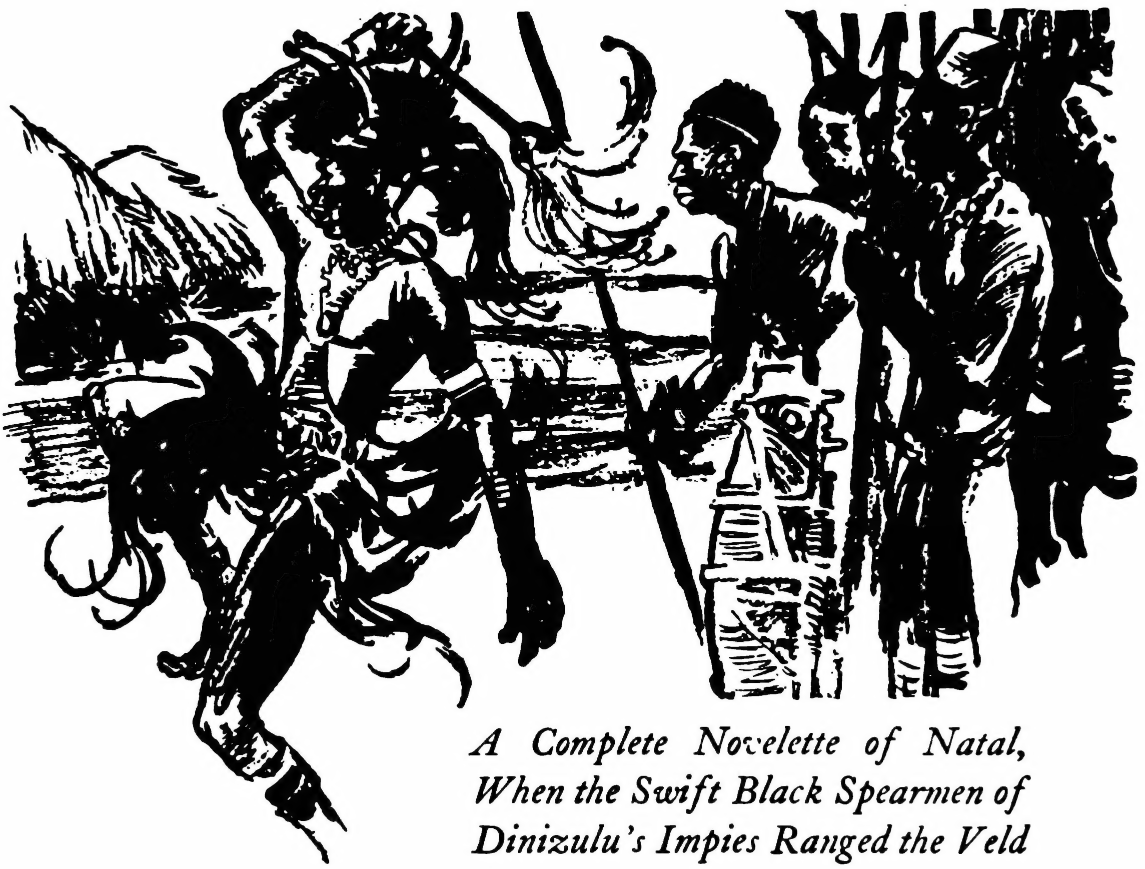
WE ALWAYS had liked the young American. When he first breezed in among us hard-bitten old-timers of the Witwatersrand and the Premier Diamond Fields, we called him "Nevada" Jack Featherstone, nicknaming him after a region most of us had never heard of until the youngster commenced singing its praise. It was, with him, "In Nevada this and in Nevada that," from morn till night. In this way we learned that Nevada was a sovereign State of North America which, among other things, produces a kind of vegetable known as sagebrush.

As I said, it did not take the boy long to make his footing among our bunch of grizzled, somewhat cynical pioneers who had lived in South Africa ever since that Boer child was found at play with a bright pebble. That toy—which afterwards turned out to be a ten thousand pound sterling diamond, found on an arid stock ranch on the edge of the Kalahari Desert—opened up the richest diamond fields the world has ever known, making Golconda a fact instead of a legend and shaping the history of an entire continent. And, incidentally, it profoundly influenced the life history of one Jack Featherstone, of Nevada, U. S. A.

He came to us well recommended, with a brand new diploma from the mining faculty of his native State and a magnificent conviction that the world was his oyster. Sir Thomas, who controlled the destinies of our diamond mining syndicate, took one look at Jack, waved aside his credentials and put the youngster on. His work in the next two years again proved the chief's uncanny knack for picking the right man for the right place.

Then came the day that the chief asked Murdock, the Scotch compound superintendent, and myself into his office for a conference. At the end of the conference Sir Thomas decided:

"Jack Featherstone is the man to go. He has every requisite for the job, speaks Zulu fluently, and is liked by the boys Also, he has youth, and will venture where you old chaps are liable to be over-conservative. Tell him to report to me immediately."



A Complete Novelette of Natal, When the Swift Black Spearmen of Dinizulu's Impies Ranged the Veld

Reluctantly I went to look for Jack.

"Great scott," I thought, "does the chief realize that he may be sending the boy to his death. If the Ama-Zulu ever get wind of what he is after, they will assagai him then and there."

I found him near the big pit, or *gat* as the Boers call it, where the great Cullinan diamond, as big as a man's fist, was found. The stone had been purchased by the Union Government and presented to the King of England, after it had been cut and polished at Amsterdam.

Jack was standing near the edge of the pit, surrounded by a group of admiring Kaffirs who were watching the white man as he experimented with a new type of drill. Jack was everlastingly tinkering with some mechanical device, even at times when sane men foregathered on the club veranda to sip whisky sodas and talk big game or politics.

I told him that the chief wanted to see him, and together we returned to the office. Sir Thomas came to the point right away.

"What did you come to Africa for, Jack?" he asked abruptly.

"To make my fortune, Sir Thomas," the youngster grinned. "Only I expected to make it right off the bat. You know, it's kind of tough standing by while a lot of diamonds are taken from the blue earth all day, and yet not having any of them coming my way. It makes me think of my old dad who worked in a bank at Virginia City, Nevada, during the good old gold and silver days. Each day millions passed through his hands, but on Saturday he had to wash his other shirt."

The chief smiled.

"Never mind your Nevada stories, boy. But—did you come to South Africa for money alone? Or was it because you wanted to look upon the fair face of adventure?"

Jack nodded.

"Sure thing, Chief. But there has been a lot of hard work and mighty little adventure. Not that I am complaining, but if you had any bright faced adventure around here please trot her along."

Sir Thomas pointed to a chair.

"Sit down and listen. And no smart cracks. This is a serious business. If you take the job I am going to offer you, it means risking your life. On the other hand, it is a short cut to fortune and fame."

The American nodded, brought out his pipe and blesbok skin tobacco pouch, and said quietly:

"I am listening. Shoot! Fame and fortune. That's the stuff!"

"You know," the chief commenced, "all about the great Cullinan diamond that was found out in the pit some time ago. As a matter of fact, you were one of the first men to handle it. Looked like a big lump of rock salt, remember? Good. You have probably also heard the extraordinary theory that this gem was but the smaller half of what had originally been one huge block of diamond. That theory, you know, is based by experts on the formation of the Cullinan, and on certain interesting flaws and lines——"

Jack interrupted.

"Yes, I have heard that theory. It seems sound enough to me, and I have thought all along that the other half of the Cullinan must still be about somewhere. Probably the original stone was split by the same natural phenomenon which created the diamond, and I fully expect that some day we will come across it, hidden away in a layer of blue earth."

The chief smiled.

"I am glad you are no cynical unbeliever, Jack," he said. "It makes it easier for us to get along. So much for the theory. However, we have something better to go on!"

SIR THOMAS had stopped speaking and was leaning back in his chair. It was very quiet in the office. In the distance we could hear the faint singsong of a bunch of Shangaan Kaffirs in the compound. Then he said, slowly and impressively, letting each word sink in:

"I had big news this morning, boy. The missing half of the Cullinan has been found. But they have smuggled it out from the mine, right under our noses. Ha! I thought that would get you!"

For the youngster had jumped right out of his seat.

"What!" he fairly shouted. "You mean to say they've found another stone the size of a small boulder and got it away from us? Impossible!"

Sir Thomas laughed ruefully. He did not like to admit that it had been easy to smuggle a gem of such magnitude out of the mines. For the system of inspection in the diamond fields is more than strict, and no native worker is permitted to leave the compound in which he has contracted to work for a stipulated period until he has been subjected to a minute personal inspection of the most rigorous kind. You have no idea to what lengths these natives will go in order to smuggle stones into the hands of those pariahs among white men in South Africa, the I.D.B.'s, or illicit diamond buyers who hang around the mines. I, myself, during many years in the diamond fields, have seen natives with deep incisions under their arms where they had hidden diamonds, allowing the flesh to close over the hidden treasure before they ever attempted to leave the compound. Frequently, also, they swallow small stones, with dire results to themselves. Whereupon it becomes a case for the doctors at the mine hospital.

The chief shook his head disgustedly.

"I cannot see how a gem of that size was ever smuggled out of the mine" he mused. "Yet I rather think they put one over on us that time."

Jack looked puzzled.

"To what bunch of I.D.B.'s do you think they sold it?" he asked.

"That's where you come in," the chief shot back. "The diamond was not sold to any of the I.D.B. gangs that hang around the compound to corrupt our boys with rotten Cape *dop* or cheap brandy. No, sir. And that's where we still have a chance to retrieve the stone. My informant reports that the diamond was smuggled out of the compound by a little band of Zulu conspirators, and that it is now in the keeping of no less a personage than Dinizulu himself—you know, the King of the Zulus, son of Cetewayo, and last descendant of a long line of Ama-Zulu chieftains, starting with Chaka, the Black Napoleon."

"What on earth can Dinizulu want with that stone?" Jack asked in wonder. "I always understood that the Zulus did not care for such things."

"In this case they do," Sir Thomas retorted grimly. "You see, there has been unrest among the Ama-Zulu for a long time. I was down to Pretoria last week for a talk with the Government people. They think the Zulus are going to make one last try to throw off the white man's yoke. I also think something is in the wind. For one thing, practically all our Zulu workers are leaving us the moment their period of indenture expires. You know that when we take on a native to work in the mines he signs up for six months, during which time he is not allowed to leave the compound.

"Well, as soon as they are through, these men hurry back to Zululand, and no others come to take their place. That worries me, for the same thing happens whenever any of the Bantu tribes get ready to go on the warpath. News travels among them fast and mysterious, and it is likely that they are called back by their king to fight the whites. I fear that the Natal ranchers will soon see fires burning on the kopjes—a sure sign that the Zulus are on the warpath."

"Interesting, if true," Jack commented airily. "But what has a Zulu war got to do with the missing diamond?'

"Everything. Dinizulu is crafty enough to know that he cannot hope for success against the whites as long as his *impies* (regiments) are only armed with assagais, oxhide shields and knobkerries. He wants to buy rifles and munitions for his men. And these he can easily get from his neighbors to the north of Zululand, the Portuguese of Mozambique. However, the Portuguese ask spot cash for their miserable, out-of-date rifles and musty munitions, and that's where the big diamond is to play its part, you see. I have some pretty good scouts out, young fellow, and they tell me that Bambata, Dinizulu's *induna* (chief) is haggling over the stone with no less a personage than Señor Garcia, a man whom our S.A.C. (South African Constabulary) would dearly love to lay by the heels for his many I.D.B. tricks. You see, the game has started, and it is quite time for us to take a hand. Quite!"

Sir Thomas paused, and appeared lost in thought. I looked at Jack and saw that, for all his air of easy nonchalance, the youngster was highly excited. Then the chief raised his head and gave his orders in his usual incisive, businesslike manner:

"You will immediately proceed to Zululand, leaving the train at Pietermaritzburg. Thence you will go by transport to Eshowe, and so to Dinizulu's kraal. You must masquerade as a peddler of Kaffir goods, and we will therefore supply you with a stock of gaudy blankets and colored cloth. You must go well armed, but keep your weapons out of sight. Of course, you are taking a big risk, boy. But if you get the stone, your fortune is made."

Sir Thomas rose from his chair.

"Well, are you game? Want to go?"

"I'll say I do," Jack answered, smiling as if he had been asked to a party. "And the sooner I start, the better."

"Good for you. I had expected you would. But let me caution you a little further. Not only will you have to outwit Dinizulu and his *indunas*, but remember we are not the only people who have got wind of this fabulous stone. Machado and his Portuguese know all about it, of course, and I understand that one of the I.D.B. outfits has also been tipped off. I would not be a bit surprised, therefore, if you run into plenty of competition. The main thing now is speed, and plenty of it, for you've got to get into Zululand before the whole blooming country is up in arms against the whites. So be ready to leave tomorrow noon. Here, let's have a drink."

We drank to Jack's success, and to the discomfiture of all the Zulus. The way in which each man took his drink was characteristic. Sir Tom and I made rather a slow and solemn business of it, whereas Jack tossed his off rapidly in one or two gulps, without batting an eye. Then, saying that he was going to look after his rifles, he rushed from the room, leaving two elderly men worrying as to whether or not they were morally right in sending this happy-go-lucky youngster on such a perilous errand.

CHAPTER II

INTO ZULULAND

IT WAS afternoon, and the wide expanse of veld, broken here and there by clumps of dwarfed trees and brush, lay shimmering in the heat. High up in the sky soared an eagle. Out on a kopje a band of *baviane*—baboons—had posted scouts to be on the lookout for the apes' hereditary enemy, the pale eyed *luipaard*. Well out in the open, and sufficiently removed from the nearest bush to feel secure from the tawny death that comes stalking through the tall grass, grazed a herd of springbok. All seemed peaceful; but it was the peace that came with the consciousness of taut muscles, ready to dash away at the first and slightest waft of an unfamiliar smell to questing nostrils.

Through the middle of this region, a depression between the high veld and the kopjes, wandered a small *spruit* mothered by springs in the western highlands. During the rainy season, in the months of January and February, it was a raging torrent, but had now shrunk to a mere trickle of water easily crossed at various drifts where itinerant Kaffirs had improvised crossings of stones. And near one of these drifts, Jack Featherstone, accompanied by two natives, had pitched camp under a huge *untombe*.

Umbelini, guide and master of the mules, had just returned from a visit to a neighboring kraal. This had been in the nature of a friendly call, ostensibly for the purpose of buying some fresh curdled *maas*, but in reality to find out whether the natives were still friendly, or whether the expected call to arms had come from Dinizulu. Umbelini, in whose veins flowed the blood of Cetewayo, and who could therefore claim kinship with the obese Dinizulu himself, was reporting to his white master in the flowery fashion of the Ama-Zulu.

Still, he declaimed, was there peace in the land. Yet would the blue cranes stop to dance on the clear spaces in the bushveld. But the day would come, and was fast approaching, indeed, when all wild life would flee before the advent of great *impies* of Ama-Zulu fighting men—*impies* thirsting for the blood of the white men, their women and their children. Umbelini could see them come, clashing assagais on shields, filling the air with the royal salute "*Bayete!*" in honor of their king, the while the red *impala* dashed affrighted into the bush.

Jack listened quietly. He knew better than to interrupt this flow of oratory. At last the native was done, and the white man summed up:

"In fact, they received you well enough at the kraal, but you could feel the undercurrent of hostility. You believe the Zulus are ready to rise as soon as they get the word. Is that all?"

"*Inkoos*, I have yet other news. They told me at the kraal that the *umlungu* is not the only white person who is traveling toward the royal kraal. A white *inkoosiezana* is encamped on the banks of this same *spruit*, but a few miles higher than we."

"What! A white woman? By herself?"

"Even so, *Inkoos!*"

The news fairly startled Jack. What on earth, he thought, would a white woman be doing all alone in Zululand at any time, and at this time in particular? She was traveling to Dinizulu's kraal, Umbelini had said. Could she, by any chance, know about the diamond? The thought seemed preposterous. The woman might belong to one of the missions, the order to leave had not reached her, and she was now blissfully journeying into the heart of Zululand, unconscious of gathering clouds. The more he thought, the more likely did this solution appear.

"Well, guess it's up to me to pay the lady a visit, and to tell her to *hamba* quick," Jack soliloquized.

Ordering Umbelini to follow, he set off through the heat of the day, following the course of the *spruit*. As he forced his way through clumps of bush interspersed with African mimosa and *wacht-een-beetje*, and waded in spots through the deep sand, he cursed the luck that would make him late in starting after sunset, for he had planned to cover more miles, before camping for the night. As it was, the sun had sunk behind the kopjes when he at last glimpsed a white tent pitched in the shade of a huge *klip* near the river.

A very old, very wrinkled Hottentot sat huddled near a small fire, roasting *mielies*. The little brown man at first seemed paralyzed with surprise by the appearance of the white man. Then he ducked behind the tent, to return with two tall natives, each armed with a rifle. Sensing their panic Jack stopped in his tracks.

"Where is your *inkoosiezana?*" he asked.

Before they could answer, a shapely arm was thrust through the canvas and a moment later a woman stepped from the tent.

She was almost as tall as Jack himself. And of a dark beauty. Wearing a riding habit of light Holland linen, she offered a striking study in black and white. Dark eyes, long lashes, and olive complexion, all gave evidence of a heritage of Andalusia. Though no judge of a woman's age, Jack guessed her to be about twenty-two.

Carefully dressed as she was, standing in the opening of the tent and betraying no surprise at the appearance of the white man, she had an indefinable air of being at home in the wilderness. Standing before her, hot and dusty, Jack felt a vague irritation at this picture of unconcern. Siegfried, come to slay the dragon and rescue beauty in distress, seemed to have found beauty and dragon taking tea together. He introduced himself briefly, saying that his camp was pitched farther down the *spruit* and that he would be glad if he could be of service to her.

"These are troublesome times in Zululand, particularly for white women," he added pointedly.

The girl listened politely, and smiled as he hinted at the perils of the time and the country. And there was irony in her voice, as she replied that she did not need assistance. She was awfully sorry—this with a fleeting glance at his dusty boots and leggings—that he had given himself so much trouble, and come so far, but, really it was quite unnecessary. Yet, she was ever so much obliged! Then, with a freezingly civil little nod, she lifted the flap of the tent and disappeared.

Jack was furious at this abrupt dismissal. The situation was not improved by a malicious snicker on the part of the ancient Hottentot and by traces of amusement on the faces of the woman's other servants. Turning savagely, he bade Umbelini follow him.

ALL the way back to camp he raged and pondered. What could this woman be doing? Was she, after all, an emissary of the I.D.B. syndicate he had been warned against? Still, it was absurd to suppose that the I.D.B.'s would send a woman on a quest like this! On the other hand, did the missions employ women of such striking appearance? He could not make the thing out and, having got back to camp, tried to dismiss the matter by ordering the immediate breaking up of the camp.

In the next three hours he made good time, and at last outspanned for the night in a small depression at the foot of some low kopjes. He satisfied himself that the mules were securely fastened to a nearby *mubaba* tree by long *riems* of hippo leather that gave them sufficient of a cruising radius for comfort. Then he ordered his men to take turns at keeping watch and wrapped himself in his blankets. Exhausted with the long tramp of the afternoon he was soon fast asleep.

The sound of a shot was yet in his ears, when he awoke. A second shot! Jack jumped up and an assagai whizzed by his head, burying its point in the very center of the campfire and causing the sparks to fly in all directions.

"*Plat, Inkoos, plat!*" Umbelini warned.

The white man, still groggy with sleep, had sufficient presence of mind to throw himself flat on the ground and crawl off into the bush to one side of the fire.

It was useless to return the shots of the hidden enemy. But the attack did not develop, and no more shots were fired. For the next hour, just before dawn, they remained lying in the bush, fingers on trigger, ears strained to catch the slightest sound and eyes piercing the shadows. When dawn came at last they found the mules were gone.

"Stampeded! I thought so," Jack exploded. "I knew the mules couldn't break those hippo leather *riems* so easily."

Umbelini shook his head.

"*Inkoos,*" he ventured, "the *muilezels* did not break the *riems*. See here." And he showed how the tough straps had been neatly sawed through, as with a sharp knife.

"Then they stole the mules!" Jack exclaimed.

"No, *Inkoos*, they did not," the native answered. "They-that-came-in-the-night only made this disturbance so they could cut the *riems*, and stampede the mules."

"You think then that their only object was to break up our transport and set us afoot in the heart of Zululand?"

"Even so, *Inkoos*. The warriors that attacked us did not seek to kill. Had this been their object, and had they been in any strength of numbers, you and I would not have seen the sun climbing the kopjes yonder. But—we bandy words about that which cannot be helped. We should be searching the bush for the mules, if they are not yet unharmed."

The Zulu, like all his race a born tactician as well as a flowery orator, had evidently taken charge of the situation, and the American felt thankful to the Scotch compound manager at Premier's who had insisted that he should take along this man who now proved himself a master of veld craft, fully able to cope with the situation.

"Take along Umbelini," the grizzled old Scot had said. "You may think you know a lot about the veld, but remember, all your outings have been hunting trips only, and this may turn into a real native war before you are through."

The American did not doubt for a moment that his camp had been attacked by a few Zulu stragglers.

Jack followed Umbelini when the Zulu moved off into the bush, tracing the spoor of the mules. This he seemed to have no difficulty in doing, although the spoor often mingled with that of the springbok, blesbok and other animals. Fortune favored them, for presently there came a braying from the very center of an almost impenetrable clump of *doornbome*. It required skill and patience to push through these thorn trees, the branches of which were covered with immense white spikes, each longer and thicker than a needle. Surely, the white man thought, the mules could never have penetrated this awful spiked barrier! To his intense surprise they found the animals standing safely in a small open clearing in the midst of the clump.

Somehow it seemed to Jack that the animals were almost as relieved to see him as he was to find them.

"I wonder what you could tell me about tonight's adventure," he said, patting the nearest mule. "And whatever made you run into the very heart of this barrier of thorns is more than I can explain."

Umbelini nodded solemnly and launched into a long harangue, the burden of which was that whenever domesticated animals such as mules or horses, or even cattle, are stampeded in the *bosveld,* they invariably make for the nearest clump of thornbush for protection. Neither jackal, nor leopard, and particularly not lion, care to have their fur torn by the long white needles, he said.

Leading the mules out of the forest of thorns was an arduous job, but Jack was overjoyed at having recovered the animals without which it would have been impossible to push through to Dinizulu's kraal. His satisfaction was all the greater when Umbelini said that no transport of any kind was available at the intervening kraals, and gave it as his opinion that they would even have trouble in obtaining food supplies there.

With much chopping of branches, doubling and pushing, they at last got the animals into the open and soon reached camp.

FOLLOWING a repast of some *biltong,* or dried game meat, coffee and mealie pap, they got ready to trek, when Umbelini appeared before the white man and, lifting his hand in the Zulu salute, made it plain that he had something to say.

"All right, shoot," said the American.

"*Inkoos,* they who attacked us last night were not Ama-Zulu," Umbelini announced.

"Not Zulus!" Featherstone repeated incredulously. "Great scott, man, who else could have played us this trick? We are in the heart of Zululand; everybody around here is Zulu; we know that the Zulus are going on the warpath. Who else could it have been? Think again, old bean!"

The Zulu remained imperturbable. He repeated:

"*Inkoos,* they were not of my people. If we had been attacked by one of Dinizulu's *impies,* your eyes would have been closed in death by now, and the jackals would be devouring our flesh. No, *Inkoos,* no ringed warrior had a hand in this."

"Then be good enough to tell me who did," the white man scoffed. "Surely, there's no other tribe around here that you know of?"

"*Inkoos,* the assagai was thrown, the shots were fired, and our mules stampeded by the orders of the white *inkoosiezana* that would have no speech with thee when we called at her camp yesterday," Umbelini replied. "Of this I can give you proof."

With a dramatic gesture the Zulu opened his hand, and produced a piece of crumpled white cloth.

"This, *Inkoos,* belongs to the *inkoosiezana.* A piece of the white shawl that covered her shoulders when we saw her. No Zulu woman has such cloth, *Inkoos.*"

Jack stared.

"Where did you find it?" he asked.

The Zulu pointed.

"It was hanging from the branch of that *mubaba* yonder. Thence came the shots. The *inkoosiezana's* clothes were torn when she fled with her servants, the monkey faced Hottentot and the two Shangaans. Aye, *Inkoos,* be sure, it was the *inkoosiezana* who ordered and led the attack on our camp. No Zulu would have contented himself with merely chasing our mules away. The shots were fired to frighten us and stampede our animals."

Jack sensed that the Zulu was right. He now recalled that when the white woman stepped from her tent she had worn a shawl draped over her shoulders. The shred on which Umbelini based his deduction was of the texture generally used for shawls.

His first impulse was to double back and demand an explanation. Then he decided this would serve no good purpose.

"She would probably prove a first class liar and deny the thing altogether," he muttered angrily.

Moreover, she was evidently also on her way to Dinizulu's kraal, and he could await the day of reckoning there as well as elsewhere. So he ordered an immediate continuance of the trek, hoping to reach the black monarch's capital of beehive huts within two days.

To make up for the time lost in hunting the mules, they made a long trek that day, limiting the afternoon's outspan to thirty minutes. Umbelini had suggested that they should make the banks of the Umfalosi River toward evening, and camp there.

They came to the Umfalosi a little before dark and, leaving the natives to fix camp, Jack wandered along the banks of the river, looking for blesbok or *impala*. They had that day forced the going to such an extent that he had failed in what the Bantu considers the white man's first duty; namely, to go out and shoot meat for the expedition. For a while he saw no trace of the game which had been plentiful enough during the day. At last, cresting a *donga*—or deep erosion washed out by surface waters—he spotted two grazing animals. At first he thought they were zebra, but, coming closer, found to his stupefaction two representatives of that useful, if stubborn, domesticated tribe, the Texas mule!

Jack came to a sudden stop. Here was another mystery! Only white men travel with mules in Africa.

"Looks as if the whole Rand is picknicking in Zululand," he said disgustedly. "Guess here's another outfit trying to get hold of that stone! But where is their camp?"

Moving cautiously, he approached the *donga*. Looking down into the narrow, steep cañon, he spotted a campfire, and a little way beyond the fire a tent. Just then a figure came out of the tent and approached the fire. It was a white woman, and he recognized her at a glance.

"That woman again," he told himself. "This is getting to be a neck to neck race. But we'll give her a run for her money."

Running back quickly to camp, he ordered his men to prepare some coffee, saying that after they had eaten, the trek was to be continued until midnight. To Umbelini he explained that the white *inkoosiezana* had pitched camp in the *donga*.

The Zulu made no comment. He simply pointed to the sky and said:

"*Maning manzi*. (Much water)."

Jack looked.

The appearance of the world had changed. No longer was the veld clothed in the red robe of sunset. The sky had changed to a huge black skullcap with fantastic tassels of black threads running down to the ends of the earth. The veld had lost its angelus atmosphere, and now seemed like a cowering herd of *impala* trembling at the roar of Simba.

Darker grew the sky. Purple tints on distant kopjes changed to black, then faded out entirely. A little wind came and was gone. A gust of suffocating heat stole over the plain.

The white man watched until recalled to the perils of the coming storm by the hurry and bustle of his servants. The Basuto was leading the mules to the shelter of a huge rock which leaned tilted to one side against the sheer side of the kopje. Umbelini already had removed the tent and the Cape-carts.

"Great *manzi* and cloud fire, *Inkoos*," he predicted, working feverishly. He pushed the high wheels of one of the Cape-carts close to the rock and, jumping in the cart, took everything movable out of the vehicle, and then cached the goods between the wheels.

As he worked, the Zulu grew talkative in the oratorical manner of his race.

"Soon," he chanted, "will the great cloud fires split open the high gates. Then will the river-that-is-in-the-sky overflow its banks, and the great *manzi* will rush down to flood the veld. Aye, the Umfalosi will turn yellow and fat with new waters, and nothing will stand in its way. Aye, the waters will stream over the land, and every *donga* will be a lake."

"Every *donga* will be a lake," the American repeated. Then the full significance of the phrase came home to him as he visioned that deep cleft in the earth half a mile away, in which the white woman had pitched her camp. Turning to the Zulu, he said:

"The white *inkoosiezana* is encamped in the *donga* over yonder."

Umbelini showed just as much surprise as his native stoicism would permit.

"So!" he said. "Then the *inkoosiezana* is in the hands of fools. Only Shangaans and Hottentots would be fool enough to outspan in a *donga*. It is well. Thus shall we be freed of those who, like the jackals, attack by night."

"Nothing doing!" the American snorted. "The *inkoosiezana* is white, my friend, and we are going to get her out of this pickle. Come along; step lively." He dashed away, and the Zulu followed.

CHAPTER III

STORM ON THE VELD

THE cloudburst came after they had covered about half the distance to the *donga*. It followed a prelude of two claps of thunder, with lightning forking down and striking the veld in a hundred places where iron ore cropped to the surface. Down came the rain, at first as a dense veil of water lashing the earth in big drops like hailstones. Then a solid body of water appeared to have been turned over, deluging the veld. In vain did the white man and the Zulu struggle to keep their footing. They were beaten down and forced to lie, face down, in the mud. Then the wind grew into a hurricane, and they crawled forward on hands and knees.

At last they reached the *donga*, and peered down into the darkness below. The tent and campfire had vanished, and what had been a deep, dry fissure in the parched soil was now a raging torrent. One glance showed that there could have been no escape for any living thing.

"We are too late," Jack shouted, trying to make himself heard by Umbelini. "Nothing could live through this flood."

They remained lying on the brink of the chasm until the downpour and the storm slackened somewhat. As they at last crawled back to the protection of the rock, Jack thought hopelessly of the girl's dead body, caught in the whirl of the water-swept *donga*.

The cañon was more than half filled by this time, and, leaning over the side, Jack could see the flood rising higher still. A few more minutes of this, and the waters would reach the very top of the *donga*.

Just then the lightning played again, throwing the entire scene into sharp relief. Imagination or not, Jack could have sworn that he had seen a white figure a short distance below, frantically climbing the slope. Intuition told him it was she. Shouting to Umbelini, he dashed down the wall of the *donga*. He stumbled and fell in the darkness, then waited for the lightning to flash again. There she was—the crest of the flood reaching after her like a living thing. The next moment he had reached the girl and dragged her up the slope safely, though the water washed up to his knees.

Once beyond reach of the flood the girl dropped exhausted.

Jack felt a sudden overmastering rage. This was the girl who had come to his camp like a thief in the night to scatter his transport. Yet he had just risked his life for her. He felt like Don Quixote, up-to-date.

"Get up, you!" he stormed. "Do you think I want to stay here all night?"

She rose without speaking. Turning his back on her with deliberate rudeness, Jack led the way to camp. He again and again told himself that he had been all kinds of a fool to take the risks of the past hour for the sake of a woman who was not only an utter stranger but who had deliberately set herself to obstruct his plans.

Reaching their shelter, the girl, water streaming from her clothes, pressed close to the rock, while the men crouched under the Cape-cart. For another hour the storm lashed the veld. Then suddenly the wind died down, the clouds dispersed, and the Southern Cross shone through in serene splendor. From all sides came the sound of running water. Far down in the *donga* the torrent still thundered.

THE natives busied themselves building a fire for the evening meal. Then they fell to and ate voraciously. The girl did not approach, but remained huddled up, her face to the rock.

"Can't let her stay like that; she must be soaked through," Jack muttered. Somewhat conscience-stricken, he walked over to her. "Better get up and have some hot coffee," he invited, shamefacedly.

She evidently had no false pride, and replied that she would be glad to have the coffee. Then she came and stood by the fire, spreading out her wet skirts to the glow. He handed her a tin cup filled to the brim with steaming coffee. She thanked him demurely, and asked:

"My servants—I suppose there's no hope of their being saved?"

"Not a chance in the world," he assured her. "You were almost gone yourself."

A brief silence. Then she ventured timidly:

"I ought to thank you, but after what has happened I take it you don't want any of my thanks?"

Jack stared. Here was cool impudence. Was she admitting her part in the night attack on his camp? Curtly he asked:

"Then it was you who stampeded my mules?"

"Yes, it was done by my orders."

She was so casual about it that the American spluttered helplessly:

"You must be crazy. What made you do it? You did not know me from Adam. You and I are the only whites in this wilderness, and yet you make war on me. Tell me: what is it all about?"

The girl looked direct at him, her dark eyes calm and unwavering. In the firelight her face seemed pale as ivory in its frame of jet black hair. She made no answer.

Jack laughed contemptuously.

"I suppose I can make a good guess," he jeered. "You know well enough who I am, don't you?"

The woman nodded.

"Yes, you are a Diamond Syndicate engineer," she said quietly.

"Fine! I see your intelligence department is well informed. And I suppose you know all about my mission, too?"

Again she inclined her head.

"Yes. That I know also. You are after the other half of the Cullinan diamond."

Once more he could only stare, taken aback by such utter frankness. Then he found his voice.

"And you, I suppose, are the emissary of rival interests?"

Her unconcerned attitude intrigued the American and he felt his resentment slowly evaporating.

"Yes, I am," she answered. But there was no trace of apology in her voice.

He laughed ironically and bowed.

"Madam, your frankness is appreciated. To put it bluntly, and having no desire of hurting your feelings in the matter, you are then the tool of a gang of illicit diamond buyers—the crooks of our industry. Am I right?"

The girl tossed her head; a tinge of color had come to her cheeks. She seemed to consider the nature of her reply. Then she said defiantly:

"Call us what you please. But we have as much right to the diamond, provided we can get it out of the kraal of the Zulu king, as you may think you have."

The cool assurance of her reply left him dumbfounded. With labored politeness he inquired:

"And will you kindly tell me on what grounds you base your claim. Please remember that the gem was stolen, or shall we say, abstracted, from our own mine."

"I will not discuss the justice of your claim to possession of the mine," she retorted with a lawyer's precision. "The original inhabitants of the stretch of Transvaal veld on which your mine is located—the Kaffirs—may have something to say about that. So, likewise, may the Boers, who disputed the matter for three years with the British, as you may recall. But, granting that you own the mine, you certainly do not own the diamond we are both after. That gem at present belongs to King Dinizulu, who is trying to sell it for arms and munitions with which to fight the whites. Therefore, anyone attempting to beg, borrow or steal the diamond from its present owner is performing a patriotic act, aside from the profit involved. That's all!"

She spread her hands to the fire, ignoring the chuckle of her amazed host at this unique explanation of a highly original point of view.

"That," said Jack, "is the most specious argument I have ever listened to. However, we now know where we stand. It seems that both of us are on our way to Dinizulu, to get his diamond. Circumstances make it impossible for me to leave you alone on the veld, and I will therefore see that you are made comfortable at the first native kraal we reach. But, believe me, young lady, you are not going to get that diamond! Sorry to disoblige, but war is war."

She smiled and regarded him in a wholly friendly manner.

"A la guerre comme à la guerre," she exclaimed with a sudden gayety that surprised him. She held out her hand. "At least let us have an armistice until I have thanked you for getting me out of that awful *donga*."

Puzzled, and not quite so sure of himself, he took the little hand in his and mumbled something about it being really nothing at all.

THE crests of the distant Lebombos were tinted with the quick South African dawn, when they inspanned for the day's trek. Before night, Umbelini told Jack, they would reach Umglumvulu, the kraal of Bambata, one of Dinizulu's chief *indunas* and a notorious old firebrand. For Bambata still believed in the star of the Ama-Zulu, nor had he been disillusioned by the frequent defeats of his people at the hands of the whites—Boer and British alike.

It was no secret to the Government at Pretoria that this ambitious chief had been constantly urging his obese king to strike one more blow for independence. In fact, it was largely through this *induna's* insistence that matters were now coming to a head. Dinizulu himself—once a prisoner of the British, together with his father, Cetewayo, on lonely St. Helena—had but little stomach for the fight, it seemed. However, at the various *indabas*, Bambata had baited his king, reproaching him bitterly for his cowardice and fear of the whites, and, as a result, Dinizulu had arrived at the very brink of rebellion. All this, Jack learned from Umbelini who, like all Zulus, kept in close touch with events at the royal kraal.

It was, therefore, with misgiving and some trepidation that the white man decided to continue his trek. Bambata's kraal was directly on the pass leading to Dinizulu's kraal, of which it really was an advance post, and he had no choice in the matter. A further difficulty arose in the fact that it would be impossible to leave this girl, his unwelcome guest, at Bambata's kraal, where she would be in as much, or even greater peril than in the kraal of Dinizulu. Seeing no other way out of the dilemma, he turned to her and offered to lend her one of his Cape-carts if she would return to Natal. But he met with a flat refusal.

"I have made up my mind to go to Dinizulu's kraal, even if I have to go on foot," she declared.

Jack shrugged his shoulders. He tried hard to control his temper as he told her:

"You are forcing me to take you with me to Dinizulu's kraal. Not only are you abusing the hospitality of one who already has risked considerable to save your life, but your evident aim is to use me to promote your own scheme and upset my plans. Don't you think that is pretty lowdown?"

The girl dropped her head and lowered her eyes. Her face went white and her lips trembled. But she did not speak. Seeing her humiliation, Jack cursed himself for a bully. But, he reasoned, he had no choice. His first duty was to his employers and this girl belonged, by her own admission, in the enemy's camp. He must be firm with her. He reiterated that she must go.

"I am not going back," she repeated tonelessly. "If you do not take me, I will walk."

Jack decided to call her bluff.

"Very well," he said. "Then you stay behind. Here is a gun and some cartridges, and I will have the boys put up some *beskuit* and *biltong* for you to eat. I'm sorry, but it is out of the question for me, a representative of the Diamond Syndicate, to further the schemes of an I.D.B. agent. So—good-by."

She made no reply, but stood there waiting patiently.

With a crack of hippo leather *sjamboks* over the mules they were off. Throwing up large clouds of red dust they covered half a mile, and then Jack looked back. There she stood, a pathetic little figure in white, alone on the red-brown veld. He knew then that he could not scare this woman, that his bluff would not work! He gave a brief order; the cart turned and raced back to her. As it drew up, the girl looked steadfastly at her mortified rescuer.

"No use," he said. "So far, you win! Of course you knew I would not leave you to starve on the veld. Please jump in, we've lost enough time with this tomfoolery."

He made room on the driver's seat and helped her into the cart.

She turned her head away; but he noticed the wet cheeks, the trembling little hand, and concluded that, after all, she was not the adventuress he had at first believed her. He even thought that he detected a glance of warm gratitude and that he felt a little pressure of her hand as he helped her climb the high wheels of the Cape-cart.

DECIDING that it was up to him to make the best of things, Jack made conversation. She met him more than halfway, and he learned that her name was Alma Delgado, that she had come to South Africa from Spain some ten years ago, and that she had been brought up in one of the schools on the Berea, in Durban. Subsequently she had moved with her father to Kimberley, and, afterwards, to Pretoria.

"I see," Jack interposed. "First the Kimberley Fields and then the Premier Fields near Pretoria. That's where the I. D. B.'s operate."

He had not meant to be unpleasant, but the thrust went home and she bit her lip. However, she refused to reopen the argument, and after a brief, strained silence, the American guided the conversation into general channels. She was, he soon discovered, a splendid véld woman, who had lived among the natives, and spoke Zulu as well as he did. She had hunted in big game districts which Jack knew by hearsay only. She proved an entrancing talker on the secrets of the veld and its denizens, and soon the white man found himself in such animated conversation that it seemed unbelievable that his charming and most womanly companion could actually be a hostile competitor.

Yet caution never deserted him, and, when it came to matters touching his mission, he proved to be as tight lipped as she. But again, he reminded himself, there was precious little about his plans which she did not know already. He actually began joking and asking her what she intended to do after she got to Dinizulu's kraal. She cleverly parried his questions, meeting raillery with raillery. Then she said, quite frankly, that she had no idea what she would do and that her campaign plan for the acquisition of the great diamond would entirely depend upon circumstances at the royal kraal.

A low range of kopjes stretched away before them to the north, for the most part bare of vegetation, but with dark patches of bush and jungle showing where one mountain dipped down to connect with the next, thus forming a series of passes. It was for one of these passes that Umbelini headed the mules. As they arrived at the mouth of the pass, the Zulu brought the transport to a halt and informed his master that Umglumvulu, the kraal of Bambata the ambitious, lay just beyond the pass.

He pointed out that, should Bambata already have risen in rebellion, the pass would undoubtedly be guarded, and that it would be well to prepare for an attack. So they entered the pass, rifles in hand. But no armed Zulus were in sight. However, almost through the pass they saw a young Zulu *umfaan*, a mere stripling, watching them from the hillside. They drew up and hailed him, but the youngster dashed over the low kopje, evidently bent on carrying word to those in the kraal below.

CHAPTER IV

A HOSTILE WELCOME

UMGLUMVULU did not differ from other kraals Jack had seen, except that it was larger and entirely surrounded by a stout palisade of *ysterhout*. It was a roomy kraal, containing at the least a thousand of the beehive huts typical of Zulu architecture, as well as a huge open space in the center—a place in which to herd the tribe's cattle at night, or used as a parade ground for the *impie*.

The gateway of the palisade stood wide open, so they drove through into the kraal. To the white man's astonishment there was not a single ringed man—warrior—in sight, though they were immediately surrounded by a large, curious throng of Zulu women and children. His greetings, *"Sacha bona,"* was returned courteously enough, but there was no sign of an *induna,* or even an under chief, to bid them outspan or place the guest hut at their disposal.

Nettled, and sensing an atmosphere of ill concealed hostility on the part of even the women and children Jack ordered Umbelini to ask where all the men had gone, and particularly to inquire for the whereabouts of the chief *induna,* Bambata. Umbelini's questions were answered by one of the women, a tall belle whose stature was increased by the huge artificial coiffure of clay and red ocher, denoting that she was first wife to a chief. The men of the kraal, she said, had all gone hunting . . . No, they would not return that night, nor the night after. But if the *inkoos* and the *inkoosiezana* wished to stay the night in the kraal, they would be welcome, and she would have the guest hut shown to them.

The American did not like the look of things. Feeling the need of a confidant, he turned to the girl at his side, saying:

"Something is wrong. These people are lying. Their men may be gone all right, but they did not go hunting. The *impie* has gone to war. They are either at Dinizulu's kraal right now, or they are hidden somewhere out on the veld, waiting for the signal to attack the *dorps* of the whites. Either way, we're in for a lot of trouble."

Alma Delgado appeared not a bit disturbed. She calmly regarded the tall Zulu matron, as if interested in the savage woman's finery and headdress. Then she said:

"We have to stay somewhere tonight, and it may as well be here. It's no use continuing and outspanning on the veld when we can at least get the use of the guest hut here. Morever, here we can buy eggs and *maas* (sour milk). I don't mind telling you I am very tired of a diet of *biltong* and hard biscuits."

Jack liked the girl's sang-froid, and, moreover, she spoke sense. So he informed their dusky hostess that they would stay the night at the kraal. They were en route to Dinizulu's kraal and would resume the trek at daybreak, he added, to impress her with the king's name.

Entering the large *kaya,* or guest hut, they found it was divided into two compartments by a curtain of *impala* skin karosses. Each compartment boasted a rough bench with seats heaped high with silver jackal skins—evidence that the guest hut was usually reserved for travelers of some degree who did not sleep on the bare cow-dung floor, as do the natives. Jack assigned one of these compartments to his companion, another hut having been indicated for the use of his native servants.

A Zulu woman appeared in the doorway:

"Inkoos, there is one without."

Puzzled as to who the visitor might be, they stepped from the hut, and there a strange sight greeted them. Tricked out in all his finery, consisting of a kaross of the skins of many animals, and liberally decorated with numerous bone bracelets and chains, stood a weird, emaciated figure—the chief medicine man, or *wonder dokter* of the tribe. Around his neck he wore three chains made of small bones and leopard teeth.

This strange individual was furthermore remarkable for a multitude of small bags and punches, made of blesbok skin, which dangled all over his anatomy, being suspended from his loin-cloth by thin strips of leather, and containing a variety of secret herbs and ground tree bark powders, supposed to be a panacea for all the ills of the tribe, from the evil eye to snake bite. An absurd touch was added by an old cap of some British infantry regiment, obtained heavens knows where, which he wore at a rakish angle.

"Well, look who's here!" the American remarked irreverently. "The doc himself, as I live, and he's carrying his drug store around with him. No, thanks, old chap, we're in the best of health, and don't need any chopped monkey fur or other medicine. We want to keep on living yet for a while."

All this was uttered in English, with a decided Yankee accent and a perfect poker face. The *wonder dokter* could make nothing of it, and would possibly have considered himself complimented, if the white woman had been able to maintain her composure. Unfortunately, having a strong sense of humor, she laughed out loud.

The villainous features of the medicine man were distorted with rage; for to be laughed at by a woman is a deadly insult to a Zulu. He lifted his knobkerrie as if to strike, but, as Jack quickly took a step forward, seemed to think better of it. At last he spoke, slowly and deliberately:

"The *Inkoos* and the *Inkoosiezana* are traveling to the *stad* of the Great Elephant?"

Jack nodded cheerfully.

"Yes, we are going to see Dinizulu, the king." He knew that the Zulus always *bonga*, or eulogize, their king, referring to him either as "the Great Elephant," or the "Big Black Bull," or "the Mighty Simba."

"It is not right that you should go, White Chief." This solemnly and with uplifted hand.

"Well, and why not?" the American asked quietly, fixing a cold eye on the black man.

The medicine man seemed to consider.

"Wait, *Inkoos*, I will show thee." He motioned to some young Zulu boys in the crowd that now surrounded them, and spoke to them in an undertone. The striplings dashed away.

"NOW what the deuce is going to happen?" the white man wondered, turning to his companion. "Perhaps they have armed men near by, and he has sent for them to put us out of our troubles. I'm a little worried. Hope you're not scared."

She flashed him a humorous glance.

"Don't worry on my account. I bargained for this sort of thing when I undertook to come after your diamond, my friend," she mocked.

Jack shrugged his shoulders. There was a commotion in the crowd, which turned as if in expectation of a new arrival. A murmur ran through the people, which grew to clamor as they shouted:

"The great koodoo! A judgment, a judgment!"

Then they separated, leaving a wide lane, and through this there advanced, led by the two youths, a magnificent animal, a bull koodoo, with enormous horns.

"By golly!" the American exclaimed. "Isn't this splendid? Did you ever see such horns before? What a wonderful specimen."

Alma looked at the animal with the *savoir* of a true sportswoman. She breathed:

"This is the first bull koodoo I ever saw in captivity. And look how quiet he stands! He's quite tame; they must have caught him young."

The great beast stood peacefully and patiently, unmoved by the shouts of the multitude. The people, women, children, old men, now kept up a monotonous chant:

"The great koodoo has come. A judgment, a judgment, oh, *M'limo!*"

The medicine man, or *m'limo,* now stood beside the great beast with its curved horns, running to deadly spikes at the tip. He lifted his right hand, commanding silence.

"*Tula!* You have asked a judgment," the medicine man exclaimed, his voice like a clarion. "You shall have it, my children. Stand forth, sons of warriors."

He beckoned, and a dozen of the striplings—too youthful to serve in the *impie* as yet, but men by their own reckoning, jumped toward him, gleaming assagais poised in their hands. The American gripped his revolver and instinctively placed himself before the girl. The *m'limo* saw the action, smiled sardonically, and shook his head. Then, lifting his hand and pointing to the great koodoo standing there patiently and impassively, the *wonder dokter* shouted with a great voice:

"*Bulala!* (kill!)"

The assagais flashed like darts of lightning, then sank deep into the neck and the sides of the bull koodoo. The splendid beast roared, and made one immense spring which carried it, spurting blood from many wounds, into the midst of the crowd, knocking women and children hither and thither, then crashed down, stone dead.

The *m'limo* stepped forward and with a few deft cuts laid open the belly of the koodoo.

"This is where we learn all about the future," the American whispered to his companion. "I've seen them do the same thing with slaughtered oxen, right at the mine compound."

The *m'limo* was bending over the carcass, stirring the entrails with the point of his assagai, and pretending to be absorbed in reading certain signs. Then, in a singsong, while the young Zulus clashed assagais on oxhide shields, he chanted:

"Great are the Ama-Zulu, the children of the Elephant, of Chaka the Terrible, of Dingaan who slew the Ama-Boer, and of Cetewayo who killed the *impies* of the white queen at Isandlana! Great were they in the past, and greater and more terrible shall they be in the days that are to come. Ha! I read the signs, I the *m'limo*, the son of the *matagati* who prophesied to the kings of old.

"I see many *impies* of tall ringed men march into the circle of the great king's kraal. '*Bayete, bayete,* oh thou son of the Elephant!' they call. 'Lead us against the white men who came to wrest from us the land of our fathers.' Ha! The king heeds their words. He will lead them.

"I see the *impies*—fleet footed they are—run over the veld toward Natal and across the Lebombos. The white men rally, but their hearts turn to water . . . They are slain. The Ama-Zulu warriors dip their assagais in blood and take the cattle of the whites—many thousands of heads. They dash on and on, until they reach the great rock that stands where there is no more land and where the waters meet. No white man, no woman, and no child of the accursed race remains. The dogs of the Basuto again become the slaves of the Ama-Zulu. Thus is the prophecy fulfilled."

The *m'limo* stopped, withdrew his dripping assagai from the carcass of the koodoo and waved it above his head, covering himself and those near by with drops of blood.

For a second the crowd stood spellbound, then broke into a roar and began pressing toward the whites.

"Back, and keep cool," shouted the American to the woman. "Back to the hut." He drew his revolver and fired a shot in the air, causing the crowd to hang back for a moment. Somehow they reached the hut and at the entrance stood at bay. The multitude followed, the *m'limo* in the lead.

Jack beckoned to him.

"Come, I will speak to you."

Smiling insolently, the black priest came forward, proud of his power. He seemed to think that the white man was going to beg for his help.

Jack waited until the sardonic face came close to his own; then, unexpectedly, he stepped forward, seized the priest by the leather thong of his *moocha* and, with a powerful jerk, hauled him bodily into the doorway. Pressing the muzzle of his revolver in the nape of his captive's neck, he thundered:

"Now I am the *induna* here, you skulking jackal, you dog that lags behind with the women and children when the men of the *impie* go to war. Now you listen to me, *Matagati!* Tell these people to go into their own *kayas,* all of them. Also, order those youngsters to throw down their assagais and run home to their mothers. Do you hear me, you jackal that skulks behind the lion to feast on his kill?"

With a sudden wrench he threw the *m'limo* down on his knees and brought the revolver within an inch of the self-styled magician's eyes.

The medicine man's face turned clay color. His eyes rolled in terror and he called to his people in a strangled voice. At first they seemed undecided. Then first one and then another of the boys threw down his assagai and ran. Within a few minutes not a soul was in sight but the two whites, their servants and their captive.

Jack kicked the priest to his feet.

"Now lead us to our carts, you dog. And, mind you, don't try any funny business—for my gun is in the small of your back."

THROUGH the dark night a scared and trembling *wonder dokter* led his captors to their transport. Shaking like a *mielie* stalk, he was hoisted into the cart occupied by the two natives. They drove out of the kraal for a mile, and then stopped. At this point a well directed kick tumbled the magician out of the cart. Then they drove on.

"Fortunately there is a full moon," Jack remarked to his companion. "We could have done with some sleep, but as it is we will drive all night and reach Dinizulu's kraal at daybreak, barring accidents. But you had better make yourself comfortable and take a nap."

The girl smiled.

"You are heaping coals of fire on my head," she said in a tone of warm camaraderie. "But I can drive a mule transport as well as you, let me tell you, so we had better take turns at it."

"You drive transport!" the American scoffed. "Run along and play, little girl. Why, you couldn't handle a span of mules. What would you do with a *sjambok?*"

She laughed delightedly.

"So you think I don't know how to handle a *sjambok*. Here, let me have it!"

He passed the long whip of hippo leather, and watched her as she stood up in the jolting cart, balancing her supple body without visible effort. Then she whirled the great whip and expertly cracked it over the heads of the mules without touching the animals, yet urging them to greater effort. The crack of the *sjambok* made a noise like a shot, reverberating from the low range of kopjes and rolling over the veld.

"Now let me drive," she commanded, and obediently he passed the long reins into her hands. She cracked the *sjambok* again. The mules put on a spurt, and away they went at a pace that taxed Umbelini's stride to keep up with them.

A wonderful woman, Jack mused. She would fit in a man's home as well as on the veld. The thought made him feel guilty and he sternly recalled that she was, after all, only the tool of a group of I. D. B. outlaws, and as such, liable, when caught with the goods, to the severest penalties South African law imposes. He had no doubt that she would, on arrival at the Zulu king's kraal, ruthlessly carry out her plans, whatever they might be; and that she would try to lay those white hands that now grasped the reins of the Cape-cart on that marvelous gem, the missing half of the world famed Cullinan diamond. He made up his mind to be more than a match for her, and decided to let her do the driving for the next two hours, and then take the job over himself. He stretched out in the narrow seat as well as he could and was asleep immediately . . . .

A jolt, then a jar and a crunching of the wheels. A crack of the *sjambok*, followed by a revolver shot fired almost under his nose, so that he could smell the powder. Startled out of his nap and his wits at the same time, Jack jumped to his feet.

"There, there it is, on top of the mule," the girl called, terror in her voice. "Quick, shoot, I have not another shot left."

The mules were plunging wildly, pulling the cart from one side to the other. There in the bright moonlight, Jack discerned a long, yellow body with a lashing tail literally astride the two mules.

"Lion, *Inkoos!* Shoot!" Umbelini and the Basuto were shouting from their cart which had stopped at a respectable distance. The Zulu was preparing to jump from his cart and run to their rescue, rifle in hand.

Awake at last, the white man now realized the situation. He tugged at his rifle and fired—at random, he afterwards admitted. It was a lucky shot, one of those shots that hunters are sorely tempted to take the credit for, and sometimes do. The yellow death gave vent to a spitting, screeching roar and, tumbling forward over the heads of the mules, plunged its nose into the dust, then pitched over dead.

The frantic mules dashed over the carcass of the lion, pulling the cart after them over rocks and ant hills. It seemed a miracle that the vehicle was not smashed to pieces. The man and woman hung on to the reins for dear life, eventually bringing the transport to a halt fully half a mile beyond the scene of the encounter. Then, with great difficulty, they succeeded in turning the mules back, until they came to a halt and stood trembling where their nocturnal attacker lay stiffening on the veld.

Taking no chances, Jack carefully secured the mules. Then they approached the dead lioness, for such it proved to be. It was one of the largest specimens of its kind, and magnificently coated. The American was proud to observe that his shot had entered the animal's skull from the back, just behind the head, killing it instantly.

"The Master is a great shot," Umbelini said admiringly in Boer-Dutch. Then, whipping out his sharp hunting knife, he set to removing the skin.

"It's a marvel that it didn't kill at least one of our mules," Jack breathed with relief. "We had better go and look them over carefully."

A close inspection did not, however, reveal any serious hurts to the animals beyond a few scratches. Evidently the lioness had become confused by the shooting and by the play of the *sjambok* on her back.

"Just how did it all happen?" Jack asked.

"We were entering a *vlei* and were going quite slow," the girl explained. "At the right was a small clump of trees and bush. Then, the first thing I knew, a long, snakelike shape shot out of the bush, landing square on the mules. I was so surprised that I just lashed at it as hard as I could with the *sjambok*. Then fired my revolver at it. But the mules were plunging so wildly that I missed. I am afraid that I came nearer killing our mules than the lion. I am glad you woke up in time, though."

"Well, no more sleep for me tonight," Jack answered. "It's m yturn now to drive, so you had better go to sleep."

She smiled and nodded her head.

"Yes, I will. But be sure to call me when the next lion shows up."

She turned around, nestled her head in

her arm, and went to sleep as composedly as if Africa, its big game and warlike tribes, were a thousand miles away.

CHAPTER V

AN ENEMY TO BE FEARED

THE sun was just rising over the steep ridge of the great mountain that towered over the beehive huts at its base when they drew near the *stad*, or principal kraal of the Zulus. Though the hour was yet early, their coming had evidently been heralded by guards posted on the summit, for at the gateway to the palisade they were met by a party of six warriors commanded by a tall *kehla*, or under-chieftain, whose rank was indicated by the smooth *kop* ring or head ring.

This *kehla* greeted them courteously, raising his knobkerrie in salute. Yet, when he spoke, Jack sensed a certain veiled hostility, particularly as the chief did not accord him the customary title of *"Inkoos,"* or Great Lord, but, instead, couched his remarks in the third person.

He asked:

"What is it the *umlungu* (white man) seeks so early, when the sun has but newly rising from the great *manzi* that lies beyond the mountains?"

He stretched his arm to the east, pointing in the direction of the Indian Ocean.

"We come to seek Dinizulu, the son of Cetewayo, and would have speech with him, oh *Induna* of the Ama-Zulu," the white man replied, adopting the sonorous Zulu mode of address.

"And why is it that the *umlungu* would have speech with the Great Elephant?" the chieftain asked. "Matters of state occupy the mind and thoughts of him who sits in Chaka's place, and it is not meet that he should be seen for curiosity's sake alone by all those who journey to the land of the Ama-Zulu for profit or pleasure. Also, if the *umlungu* be of those whom the Ama-Boer name *predikant*, he may save his breath; for having long since found that the Great Book of the *umlungus* is but the forerunner of the rifle, the cannon and the men that bestride horses, the son of Cetewayo will not read with them."

Jack glanced ruefully at the girl by his side.

"Here's more truth than poetry," he said to her in an undertone, "and I cannot say that I blame the king for not wanting to talk to missionaries."

Then, turning to the impassive *kehla*, he said:

"I am not a *predikant*, and neither is the *inkoosiezana* by my side. Yet have I words for Dinizulu himself, and I bring him *bansela* (a present). Therefore, stand aside and lead us to the guest hut, where we will wait until it will please the king to see us."

The *kehla* considered, then lifted his knobkerrie.

"It is well. Pass into the kraal, *umlungu*."

They entered a stage setting of Zulu life and bustle. From the beehive huts, men, women and children were crawling, rubbing the sleep from their eyes. In many cases goats, chickens, and dogs also made their matutinal appearance, having evidently spent the night with their owners in the narrow space of the family hut.

Outside other *kayas* were seated the members of the family, either occupied in cooking the breakfast *mielies* in big, black pots, or in making themselves look presentable, from the Zulu point of view.

Jack was looking about, interested in all he saw, when Alma suddenly exclaimed in fear and surprise.

"What is it?" he asked.

She did not reply, but stared over his shoulder. Her face was pale and expressive of loathing. Following her gaze, he turned and saw, seated in a steamer chair in front of one of the huts, a white man. The stranger sat smoking cigarets, blowing the blue smoke in the still morning air, while he lazily watched the new arrivals. Jack gave the stranger stare for stare. Then he felt Alma plucking at his sleeve.

"Keep away from that man," she whispered. Still holding onto his arm she hurried away, adding as they went: "I had no idea we would run across him here. I have opposed you thus far, but if he has taken a hand in the game, I am with you. The man is a ruthless fiend."

Her intensity of feeling impressed Jack, and he took a good look at the stranger. He was paid back by a cold stare out of a pair of hard, black eyes that involuntarily made Jack think of a hooded *mamba*—cobra—he had killed on a stony kopje not so long ago.

"Who is he?" Jack asked at length. "The fellow seems to have made himself quite at home here. Looks to me like a *Portogreek,* or something."

She smiled wanly at the quaint appellation used by South Africans to denote the mixed crowd of Latins in the settlements along the East African coast above Natal.

"His name is Garcia," she replied, "and he is wanted in Johannesburg for murder. The Union Government has demanded his extradition from the Portuguese in Delagoa Bay, but Garcia has powerful friends. The excuse of the Mozambique authorities was that they did not know his whereabouts, but the last we heard of him he had been seen in a box at the bull ring with one of the aides of the governor. And now he is here. I would rather meet a *mamba* in the *tambockie* grass!"

Jack laughed reassuringly and patted her on the arm.

"Why, you seem actually scared of the fellow," he mocked. "You are in a worse state of funk than when we pulled you out of the *donga.* Why this attack of nerves? What do you think the fellow is doing here?"

"Cannot you guess? How dense you are! This man Garcia has smuggled more diamonds out of the compound, including that of your own syndicate, than any man that ever lived. His presence here means just one thing: he is after the diamond."

Jack whistled, then swore.

"So that's it! Well, girlie, I guess you're right. I remember now that when I left the mine the boss warned me that a Portuguese gang was also after the missing half of the Cullinan diamond. And this fellow is the kingpin of the outfit, I suppose. Well, forewarned is forearmed. Not that he scares me any. But the sight of him has certainly thrown you into a blue funk. Cheer up. We'll soon be dead."

She made a little grimace.

"That may be very true, partner," she said. With a sly glance which he found irresistible, she added: "I hope you do not mind me calling you that?"

He looked at her, and his expression changed. She raised her eyes to his and a warm flush spread over her cheeks. She turned away, and for a moment neither could find words. Then she spoke hurriedly, and at random.

"Come, let's give up this mad business. After all, life is too sweet to set it all on the turn of a diamond—even if it be the greatest gem in all the world. Give Dinizulu his *bansela* and let's leave the kraal while there is yet time. It's the only way, I tell you."

He looked at her in astonishment.

"Why, what's up?" he wanted to know. "The sight of the *Portogreek* smoking his dirty yellow cigarets against that dobe hut seems too have thrown an awful scare into you. I'm not running away from any I.D.B. merchant! Someone is going to get that diamond out of Dinizulu's black clutches, and that someone is going to be *me!*"

She had, by now, recovered her composure and even smiled faintly at the American's slangy way of talking.

"Oh, very well." She shrugged a shapely shoulder. "As you have made up your mind to stay and face the music, I may as well explain all the facts in the case. Yes, I am afraid of Garcia, and when you have heard my story, you will realize I have every reason to be."

She caught the American's eyes with her own and held them. Then she began her tale.

"AT ONE time Garcia and my father were partners in an illicit diamond buying syndicate. Oh, spare me your views on I.D.B.! Engineers of the mining syndicates are not expected to have any others. However, my father had every right in the world to go in for I.D.B. For one thing he had been swindled out of his share in one of the greatest diamond fields of South Africa. However, that is beside the story. As I said, Garcia and father were partners. But their association lasted just long enough for father to find out what a scoundrel Garcia was.

"First, he discovered that his partner was smuggling diamonds out of the mines on his own hook. And things came to a head when he realized that the Portuguese would stick at nothing and was actually planning the murder of a compound manager whose watchfulness interfered with his operations. When my father accused him, Garcia laughed, saying that he would not allow the life of any beggarly mine official to stand in his way. My father threatened to denounce him, whereupon they almost came to blows. When I interfered Garcia coolly told my father that he had made up his mind to marry me. He did not even bother to consult me on the matter."

Jack clenched his fists and swore under his breath. Somehow he found it hard to control his voice as he asked:

"And what did you answer?"

"Can you ask?" Then she added bitterly: "Oh, I know your opinion of me! All the same, I told Garcia that I would sooner scrub *mielie* pots for the Kaffirs in the location at Marabastad, than be his wife. He turned livid with rage and began to bluster and threaten, but in the end he slunk out of the house like a whipped dog. For several days we lived in terror of our lives and hardly left the house. Then word came that Garcia had been trapped by mine police in a large purchase of illicit diamonds, and that, in shooting his way out of the Kimberley trap, he had killed a white officer and a native constable, and had fled the country. And now he is here. As he has seen us arrive together, he will conclude that we are partners. So we will both have to beware of him."

Jack nodded.

"Yes," he admitted. "It certainly looks as if we were in for considerable trouble. But I am glad to be in such good company. So we are partners—as far as Senhor Garcia is concerned. Shake, partner!"

"Yes. We are limited partners," she laughingly agreed, as their hands met in a firm clasp. "But, mind you, I am going to get the stone from Dinizulu just the same."

He smiled.

"I wish you luck and after you get it, I will certainly relieve you of it. But tell me this: How is it that your father and his friends sent you, a girl, alone into Zululand on this mission? They must have known that you have not one chance in a million. Whatever made them do it?"

Her lip trembled and she seemed near tears. Then she shook her head.

"I cannot tell you now, but I may some day. In the meantime, will you not try and think a little bit better of me, please—partner?" She looked beseechingly at him, and Jack felt a strange tightening of the throat.

He took her hand, and pressed it. The girl blushed, looked at him shyly, then withdrew her hand as the *induna* who had admitted them to the kraal approached. He brought a word that Dinizulu had been informed of the arrival of the *inkoos* and the *inkoosiezana*, and that the monarch would grant them an audience when the sun stood high in the heavens—at noon when he held his court. Until that time they were to make themselves at home in the guest hut yonder.

Jack nodded and replied that the arrangement was satisfactory. Turning to his servants he ordered them to unload from the carts the *bansela*, or presents, he had brought with him from the Transvaal, and to stow these away in the guest hut. The carts thereupon were driven to the near-by *boma*.

AFTER Alma had entered the guest hut, Jack decided to take a stroll through the kraal. He had gone but a little way when he came face to face with Garcia. The Portuguese removed his white sun helmet with a flourish, and bowed like a pocket knife.

"Greetings, senhor," he said. Then he added, ironically: "And welcome to the capital of the King of all the Zulus. I am delighted to see a white face again. You know black ebony gets tiresome after a while."

Jack glanced at him superciliously. Then he said pointedly:

"You seem to be comfortable enough, at any rate, sir. And, personally, I prefer ebony black faces, as long as they are honest, to some white faces I know of."

The Portuguese threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Splendid. I see your charming companion has taken you into her confidence," he cackled. "I certainly was surprised to see her trek into the kraal this morning. You see, senhor, I had been expecting you alone—been looking forward to our meeting, so to say. But I never thought that the beautiful Alma would accompany you!"

As the Portuguese familiarly mentioned the girl's name, Jack felt his gorge rise. He could have struck the swarthy face, but controlled his anger.

"Be good enough to keep her name out of the conversation," he snapped. "You say you have been expecting me. I fail to see how the movements of a trader could interest you."

Garcia again gave vent to his noisy mirth.

"*Deus*," he cried, slapping his riding boots with his whip, "that is good! Be a trader, by all means, if you please, senhor. But until recently you were known to me, and to others, as Mister Jack Featherstone, an engineer of the Premier Mines. Ah, you are surprised! Your astonishment flatters me. It proves that my intelligence service in the diamond fields is good, very good, indeed. I must see to it that our agent is suitably rewarded. Good work, as you would say, is it not?"

Jack stood speechless with surprise and mortification. Again he withstood the temptation to take a good punch at the sneering, fat face before him. When he spoke again, it was in the light, sarcastic vein of one who has weighed his adversary and found him wanting.

"I noticed, sir, that you were sitting out in the sun this morning," he remarked. "I would advise you to take better care of your health. The weather is really frightfully hot here in Zululand, and I am afraid you have had a little sunstroke, probably right in the back of the neck, just under the brain. So please be careful. People go dotty that way, you know."

He smiled sweetly at the enraged Portuguese, and stepped past him. Yet his composure was on the surface only, and as he walked through the *stad* he cursed the evil chance that had "wised up" his most dangerous opponent. Matters were going from bad to worse. Garcia was sure to inform King Dinizulu of the American's identity, and thus the chances that he would ever lay hands on the great diamond grew slim indeed.

However, he reasoned, Dinizulu might yet consider discretion the better part of valor, and decide that, after all, war with the whites would be suicidal. In that case the Zulu monarch would have no dealings with Garcia and his Portuguese gun runners, and would prefer to return the diamond to the Premier Mine in lieu of a substantial *bansela* in money, earning the goodwill of the South African Government into the bargain. That, he thought, would be the way out, and he decided to carry matters with a high, though tactful hand in the coming audience with Dinizulu.

Having thus outlined, to his own satisfaction, a plan of action, Jack retraced his steps to the guest hut, where he made a careful selection from his stock of goods of a present to Dinizulu. Then he sat down with Alma to a fairly appetizing meal of *maas*, *mielies*, eggs and fresh milk, which was brought in by Umbelini, who had been trading with some of the Zulu belles. They had just finished their repast when the sound of a calabash drum came to their ears. Jack jumped up.

"It must be noon, and that noise, I suppose, means that Dinizulu is ready to receive us. Let's go. Oh, by the way, I took a walk just now, and ran across your Portuguese friend. We had a little talk."

The girl blanched.

"What did he say?"

"Oh, he was surprised to see you here. As to myself, he had been expecting me."

The girl stared.

"You mean to say he knew you?"

"Yes. He knows both me and my errand."

She shuddered.

"Didn't I tell you that man is a fiend! He deals in treason and death. What shall we do?"

She gripped his arm, and he felt her trembling.

"There's only one chance," she whispered, "and you must take it. Do not go to Dinizulu's council, but hurry to the *boma*. Tell the Kaffirs to inspan, and drive away while all the kraal is at the *indaba*. Quick! Go, go!"

He disengaged his arm and smiled into her eyes.

"My dear, we have gone too far to turn back. What's more, I do not believe there is any immediate danger. Come, let us hurry. It is bad manners to keep a king waiting—even if it is a king of savages."

She made no further remonstrance.

CHAPTER VI

ZULU JUSTICE

A SHORT walk brought them to a large open space fronting a square building of slate, rock and adobe—the residence of Dinizulu himself. The open space was completely hemmed in with a large multitude of Zulus; men, women and children. The serried ranks of a plumed Zulu *impie* in full war regalia kept the multitude within bounds.

In the center of the square stood one solitary chair, a huge affair of black ebony with gold markings—the present to the King of the Zulus from a German circus owner who had been allowed to catch wild animals in the potentate's domains. This ponderous throne was draped with a huge kaross of *quagga*, or zebra skin. On each side of the chair was a large flat stone, serving as seats for those *indunas* whom Dinizulu would deign to call to his side as counselors.

Jack and his companion were led to within a few yards of the seat of royalty, where a small group stood awaiting the king's pleasure. It was composed of both men and women, litigants who had come from the farthest confines of Zululand to submit their case to Dinizulu's justice. The Portuguese, Garcia, was the only other white man present.

A burly Zulu seated just outside the King's domicile now began beating a huge calabash drum, and a shouting arose from the ranks of the Zulu nation lined up behind the regiment. Then, as the door opened, the warriors of the *impie* commenced beating the flats of their assagais on the oxhide shields and, as a heavy set, medium seized man emerged from the house, the crowd gave vent to a long drawn salute.

"Bayete, bayete!"

Dinizulu walked rapidly across the intervening space, taking no notice whatsoever of the royal salute accorded him by his royal subjects. He seated himself without more ado on the heavy chair, and the American was amused to note the king's businesslike attitude which reminded him of nothing so much as of the average American executive's arrival at the office, ready for the day's work. The incongruous effect was further heightened by the fact that the descendant of Chaka the Terrible had donned European dress, being resplendent in a natty suit of tussah silk and wearing a large sun helmet of pith with green lining.

Dinizulu waved his hand imperiously, the *bayete* died away and a deep silence ensued. A tall counselor came forward, and squatting down in front of the king, commenced a brief recital. He was the master of ceremonies whose duty it was to inform the king of the day's business. At a nod from Dinizulu, he beckoned to the waiting group, and called:

"Sirayo."

A young native stepped forward, and prostrated himself. Then, prompted by the master of ceremonies, he began a recital of his grievances. His father had died, leaving two old wives, four young wives and eighty head of cattle. The claimant, being the son of the first wife, had expected to inherit at least half of his father's estate; the other half going, under Zulu law, to his uncle, his father's elder brother, now the head of the family. However, the claimant had been driven from his father's kraal by the cupidity of his uncle, who had, moreover, vowed that, should he dare to return, his brains would be dashed out by knobkerries. Homeless, the young man had wandered over the veld, until he had met a *matagati*, or wise man, of the tribe, who had counseled him to place the matter before the Great Elephant, Dinizulu himself.

The king was leaning back in his chair during the recital, his eyes closed, small soft hands clasped over ample stomach. When the complainant ceased he suddenly opened his eyes, and, in a few words, delivered the verdict.

It was that one of the royal *indunas* was to accompany the young Zulu to his father's kraal, there to investigate the truth of his allegations. If it was found that he had indeed ground for complaint, he was to receive two of his late father's young wives, and forty head of cattle. The other two young wives and the rest of the cattle were confiscated by Dinizulu for himself, evidently as his fee for judging the case. As to the two old wives left by the deceased —they were ironically bestowed on the claimant's avaricious uncle.

As Dinizulu announced the verdict, shouts arose from his people: *"Bayete!* The Great Elephant has spoken." And a snicker ran through the *impie* when Dinizulu ordered the bestowal of the two elderly women on the person of the avaricious uncle, thus proving that the Ama-Zulu have indeed a sense of humor.

The American was immensely amused by the proceedings.

"That king knows his stuff," he whispered to the girl. "And, besides being a good business man himself, he has spoken like a Solomon. Not so bad, I think."

IN THE meantime Dinzulu had passed on to the next case on the calendar. Here the claimant was a comely Zulu matron who came to accuse her own father of the murder of her husband. She had brought several witnesses. The case was heard and judgment given with extraordinary celerity, the king holding that the bride's father had wrongfully slain his son-in-law in a dispute involving payment of twelve oxen—the marriage price for the bride.

At a sign from the chief *induna*, the culprit, a tall, white-haired *kehla*, who was present in person to plead his case, was seized and led away. The proceedings were temporarily suspended as the eyes of the multitude followed the condemned man and his captors, who started to march him up the mountain back of the kraal. On one side this mountain was precipitous, and, as the little group made its appearance above the ridge at the summit, Jack suddenly had a premonition of what was to follow.

"Turn around. Do not look," he whispered to the girl. "I believe they are going to throw the poor devil down the side."

As he spoke, an assagai gleamed in the noonday sun on the mountain, and the next instant a human form came sliding over the precipice. For some distance it dropped like a stone, then struck a projecting rock, and bounced off again into the void below. A deep chested roar from the *impie*, mingling with the shouts of women and children, announced that immediate justice, of a kind, had been done, and that they at least were satisfied with the verdict.

"Whew!" whistled Jack. "That sure was quick work. That fat king holds the long distance record for fast judging. A life more or less doesn't seem to worry him."

The girl had paled at the suddenness of the execution she had witnessed.

"It goes to show what a slim chance either of us will have if Dinizulu choses to look on us as enemies," she breathed, her hand on his arm.

"Steady, little girl, His Majesty is looking at us. I believe he is ready to give us a hearing."

Dinizulu's little beady eyes, sunk in the crevices of his fat face, were indeed turned on them. The chief *induna* now approached and said, loudly and for all to hear:

"*Inkoos*, and *Inkoosiezana*, thou hast seen justice done at the command of him who sits in the place of Chaka. The father has seen to the needs of his children. He has recompensed some and has meted out punishment to others. Come forward, for the king would learn the cause of thy coming to his kraal."

Maintaining a certain air of dignified deference, the white man and woman stepped forward, until they were face to face with Dinizulu. The monarch never stirred, but looked out of half closed eyelids at the white man. Of the woman he seemed, Zulu fashion, to take no notice whatsoever.

"Greetings, oh son of Cetewayo, King of the Ama-Zulu," the American began.

Dinizulu grunted. Then, possibly bethinking himself that he might as well observe the amenities, he answered languidly:

"Greetings, *umganaam* (my friend)."

An interval of silence. Then Jack commenced:

"When we entered the gates of your *stad*, oh son of Cetewayo, we were asked why and whence we came. I answered your guards that we came to see, with our own eyes, the greatness of him who sits in the place of Chaka, that whirlwind who swept down over the veld from beyond the great Zambezi; of him who sits in the place of Dingaan, king of many *impies*, at whose frown all men trembled. I also said, oh King, that I would ask of thee freedom to trade in the land of the Ama-Zulu. And, as an earnest of my good intentions, and a tribute to thy greatness, I have brought *bansela*."

At the word *bansela* Dinizulu's little eyes opened, and his figure straightened from the slumped attitude of boredom he had affected throughout. Quick to notice the effect, Jack turned and beckoned to Umbelini, who came forward, carrying a large bundle which he unrolled at the foot of Dinizulu's throne. As the king viewed one brillant *kombers* after another, his face assumed an expression of childish glee, which became one of positive delight when, from the center of the bundle, Jack at last uncovered the chef d'œuvre he had personally selected—a brilliant red fancy waistcoat with brass buttons, such as book-makers wear at the Johannesburg races. Dinizulu leaned eagerly forward, taking the garment in his hands, fingering it and turning it inside out. So pleased was he with the sartorial monstrosity that Jack would not have been surprised if he had divested himself of his coat then and there, in order to try on the waistcoat. Followed several pairs of brightly colored socks, all of which won royal approbation. It was evident, as Dinizulu again turned to the white man and woman, after ordering the goods to be carried to his house, that he was well pleased and friendly disposed to the generous donors. In fact, he made quite a little speech of thanks and wound up by asking how he could serve his *umganaam.*

JACK felt jubilant over his success in establishing cordial relations. He was on the point of telling Dinizulu he merely wished permission to stay some time in the royal kraal, and that he might subsequently discuss a matter of mutual profit with the king, when suddenly a voice spoke behind him:

"Beware, oh, Dinizulu, of traitors. This *umlungu* is no friend of thine, nor of thy people. He is a traitor and spy, come to despoil thee of a great treasure."

Garcia had taken a hand in the game. He came forward, and boldly thrust himself between the American and Dinizulu.

The king leaned forward. Gone was his air of lassitude; gone also the childish joy with which he had received the *bansela.* He snarled like one of the spotted *ingwas* that inhabit the *kloofs* of Zululand.

"What is it you are saying, *umganaam?*" he spat. "Prove your words, and by the spirit of Chaka I swear that yonder *umlungu* and the *inkoosiezana* will be led up the path of him who has but now preceded them." And he pointed to the mountain of execution.

Jack spoke never a word, but waited, all his senses alert, for the Portuguese to make good his threat. Garcia smiled triumphantly, and began:

"Thou knowest well, oh, Dinizulu, whence came the great diamond which rests in thy *kaya?*"

The king made no answer. For a moment his eyes left the face of the speaker, to stare balefully at the American and the girl by his side.

"It is well, oh, King. Though the shining stone is thine own, since it was found in the ancient dominions of which thy fathers were robbed by the cunning of Boer and Englishman, it is yet claimed by those that mine the great treasure field near Pretoria. In their eyes the son of Chaka and Cetewayo is but a common thief.

"These men, who claim the diamond as theirs, have sent this *umlungu* hither, in the guise of a trader, to steal the gem and return it to them. I was warned beforehand, by those that serve me, of the coming of this man. As to the woman, he fell in with her on his trek. She knows naught of his errand, and I therefore ask that, after you put this man to death, you will hand her over to me, to restore to her people. I have spoken, son of Cetewayo. *Bayete!*"

Garcia ceased, and Dinizulu swung around in his ebony chair to glare at the American.

"You dog!" he hissed. "Is this so? Speak, lest I order my warriors to plunge their assagais in your heart and stretch me the carcass of a jackal at my feet."

Jack made up his mind like lightning. This, he decided, was no time for subterruge or excuse. He had to call the Zulu's bluff. He turned disdainfully and deliberately and faced Dinizulu with as debonair an air as when he had offered him the *bansela.*

"In part, oh, King, that braying jackal has spoken the truth. Indeed, I come as an envoy from those who own the great mine at Pretoria where the diamond was found that is now in thy hands. Yet, thou knowest, this diamond has a counterpart; the other half having been found some time since in the same field. Dost thou know, oh, King, what has become of that part of the stone? Is it needful to tell thee, King of the Ama-Zulu, that it now rests among the jewels of a greater monarch than thou? That he who is king of half the world wears this great gem in the crown of England when he opens the *indaba* of his wise men—that Parliament of which thou hast heard so much? Dinizulu, bethink thee well. I stand before thee, not only as a trader, but as one backed by all the might of this great king.

"For strange words have been whispered into the ears of the great white king whom

I represent. It has been said that the other half of that great gem which he wears in his golden crown has been stolen from his dominions, that it was brought to thee, and that thou wilt bargain with it for guns and munitions with which to make war on the people of the white king!"

Jack ceased for dramatic effect. As he afterwards expressed, he "saw his words sink in." Then he resumed, speaking slowly and with emphasis:

"Therefore, I say, Dinizulu, act slowly. Thou knowest of old the power of the king-that-rules-half-the-world. Thou knowest what befell Cetewayo, thy father, and how thou, yet a child, accompanied him to that small island in the great sea--St. Helena, the home of fallen monarchs. The might of the white king sent thee there, and it was his grace that allowed thee, after the death of thy father, Cetewayo, to return, and again made thee overlord of the Ama-Zulu.

"One word more, and it is this: In truth, I come as a trader. Return the gem; it will pay thee well. Thus wilt thou earn the goodwill of the Government I serve. Refuse, kill me as thou hast threatened, send thy *impies* against the white king's people, and he will send his soldiers and his cannon to make an end of thee and thine."

THE American had spoken loudly, for all to hear. As he finished there ensued a deep silence. Then pandemonium broke loose. The *impie* howled with fury, and a thousand assagais were lifted, their points flashing in the sun. Yet discipline was good in Dinzulu's *impies*, as it had been under Chaka and all his successors, and Jack knew that as long as Dinizulu did not give the sign it was unlikely that he would be the victim of violence.

A tall *induna* now stood before the king. The small tuft of hair on his chin, so highly prized by the Ama-Zulu in the place of the full beard they seem unable to raise, quivered with rage. Dinizulu himself said not a word and seemed at a loss what to do. Evidently the white man's words of warning had gone home. Anxious to gain time Dinizulu turned to the *induna*.

"Bambata, thou hast heard. Some wisdom, of a truth, there is in the words of him who has but now spoken. Thou were counselor to my father, Cetewayo. Now speak thy mind to me."

The *induna* inclined his head.

"Aye, son of Cetewayo, I have heard. I have listened to the jackal bray at the lion, and behold: the jackal yet lives! Wouldst know what thy father, Cetewayo, would have done, oh, King? Let me tell thee. Long ere this would his *impies* have gone over the land, dipping their assagais in the blood of the whites. I see Cetewayo's shadow loom over thee, Dinizulu. He urges thee take thy knobkerrie and dash out the brains of this presumptuous *umlungu* who dares to enter Simba's own den. Thou hast asked my counsel—I say: '*Bulala umlungu!*' (Kill the whites). And commence with this man and woman!"

The *impie* took up his words with a savage shout.

"*Bayete,* Dinizulu! Death to the whites!"

Assagais clanked on oxhide shields, headdresses of ostrich feathers bobbed up and down, and the *impie* swung into the fearsome Zulu war dance, stamping bare feet on the dust-red ground until the earth shook, and forming an ever narrowing circle about the white man and woman.

Both thought the end had come. The girl held out a marvelously steady little hand which Jack clasped while he whipped out his revolver, determined to sell their lives dearly and at least send a few of the *impie* to the Zulu heaven.

By now the front ranks were almost upon them, and Jack leveled his weapon. Suddenly Dinizulu rose from his chair. Though not large of stature, he was every inch a king, and appeared to tower over the multitude.

"*Tula*" (silence!) he shouted.

As if by magic the tumult died down and the *impie* came to a stop, lowering assagais and grounding shields.

"Who are you, dogs, to carry out a sentence before I have given it?" He threw his arms wide, and turned to the multitude. "I am your king! It is easy to start a war against the white king, yet hard to finish. That I know, who was a boy when Isandlana was fought, and who accompanied Cetewayo in his exile. You know what befell our blood brethren, the Matabele, and how their King Lobengula was hunted by the white man unto his death. Therefore will I give this matter thought. It is my will that this *umlungu* and the *inkoosiezana* remain unharmed in the kraal tonight, while their life or death is considered in *indaba* by me with the chief *indunas* and *matagati*. The *impie* will return to its *boma*, and tomorrow, if our deliberations so decide, these whites will either be led on top of the mountain, or will be sent back whence they came. I have spoken. Begone!" He arose, and turning his back on all present, withdrew into his house.

With hardly a murmur the great crowd dispersed, until only the two white men and the girl remained.

"A dangerous game and bravely played, *amigo*," the Portuguese said, a note of grudging admiration tinging the sneer in his voice. "However, circumstances are going to force the king's hand, and you may as well prepare for death on the mountain tomorrow. The *impies* want war, and are going to have it. But after your death, I will be at the lady's service." He leered at the girl.

She glanced at the Portuguese as if she were about to step on a loathsome reptile, then took Jack's arm and drew him away before he could answer Garcia's taunts.

CHAPTER VII

ESCAPE BY NIGHT

THEY were not interfered with as they retraced their steps and entered the hut. Out of sight of the Zulus, Jack relaxed from the strain under which he had labored.

"That was a narrow shave," he sighed and wiped the perspiration from his face. "I thought it was going to be the last of you and yours truly when those warriors closed in on us with their assagais. Wish I was safely back in God's country!"

Alma came close to him. Something in her eyes as she looked up at him made Jack feel that whatever had passed, or might yet come to pass, was worth while. Placing her hands in his, yet seemingly unconscious of the intimacy of the gesture, she said:

"You were splendid. It took courage to stand up to Dinizulu the way you did. And I feel sure that things will work out right."

Her eyes were strangely luminous, as they gazed into his. Something seemed to draw them closer. Then she came to his arms and their lips met. Far from Zululand and the plumed *impies* were they for that moment, forgotten the beehive hut and its furnishings of wild animal skins, fitfully illuminated through the narrow opening of the insufficient doorway. At last she drew away, blushing and demurely seated herself on the long leather bench.

Jack was the first to break the self-conscious silence that fell between them, saying:

"We will be married as soon as we get back to civilization—that is, if you love me."

She gazed searchingly at him.

"You know my I.D.B. record. Remember, I am outside the law!"

He laughed boyishly.

"The law seems very far away. And besides, we are partners, you said. Between the two of us we are going to get that sparkler out of Dinizulu's clutches, and I would like to meet the man who would dare call my wife an illicit diamond buyer!"

She lifted troubled eyes to his.

"And so you trust me completely? You do not fear that I will secure the diamond for myself?"

He shook his head and smiled.

"All I am worrying about right now is to get hold of the diamond and escape from Zululand with you. Then for a marriage license, a quick trip to Premier to return the stone, and a wedding trip."

She sighed happily, then wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed him. And thus they sat together while the shadows lengthened in the royal kraal of Dinizulu, son of Cetewayo.

A voice called from beyond the hut.

"Kos, kos, Inkoos."

"Dinner is ready," said Jack, smiling at the girl. He went out to see.

Just outside the doorway Umbelini was squatting.

"I bring food, *Inkoos*," he announced, in his matter of fact manner, pointing to three large crocks, containing *maas*, or curdled milk, a staple food of the Zulus, eggs, cooked goat flesh, and boiled *mielies*.

"Umbelini, what are the Zulus going to do?" the white man asked quietly.

The Zulu considered his answer carefully.

Then, speaking as equal to equal, he replied:

"Dinizulu well knows the great strength of the white people, and he fears their magic, *Inkoos*. As he heard thy words of warning I could see his heart turn to water, and he would willingly have given thee leave to depart from his kraal. Aye, and furthermore he would have been glad to sell thee the shining stone thou seekest. But the young men of the Ama-Zulu are ever eager for war. They are like Simba after he has fasted because the veld was empty of *impala*, and the *quagga* had fled. Our fate now depends on the *indaba* the king will hold this night. Therefore, when the morning comes, let us make ready to die like men—thou, *Inkoos*, wielding thy stick-of-death, and I stabbing with my assagai, and covering thee with my shield. It is better to die thus, fighting like men, than to be led unresisting up the mountain, and cast from the top."

The white man was heartened by the Zulu's plucky bearing.

"Thou art a brave man, Umbelini," he said. "And, indeed, we will die like men."

Umbelini inclined his head and then remarked that he and the Basuto would spread their karosses for the night at the entrance to the hut.

Returning to the *kaya*, Jack and Alma ate of the food the Zulu had brought. Thereupon they made themselves as comfortable as possible with the karosses heaped in the corners of the hut.

IT SEEMED to Jack that they had hardly dropped off to sleep, when he was awakened by a tugging at his arm.

"*Inkoos*, there stands one without who would have speech with thee," came the voice of Umbelini out of the darkness. "Although I cannot see his face, I believe he is a great *induna*, for his kaross covers him entirely and is the largest and most costly I have ever seen."

"Is the man alone?" Jack asked curiously, wondering who could seek him in the dead of night with all the kraal asleep.

"Aye, *Inkoos*, he is alone, and cautioned me to make no outcry. He says he comes as a friend," the Zulu added.

"A friend, eh! Well, the Lord knows we need one. Show him in, Umbelini, and tell him to be sure not to bump his head in the doorway."

As Umbelini turned to leave the hut, the white man struck a match and lit the small lantern that formed part of his equipment.

"I want to have a good look at our midnight visitor," he whispered to the girl who was now also awake. "You never know what weapons the gentleman may be hiding under that fine kaross of his that has made such an impression on our friend, Umbelini!"

He had hardly spoken, when a man, bending low in the doorway, entered the hut. Face and figure were carefully hidden in the folds of a magnificent kaross of *quagga*, or zebra skin. Here, indeed, was a personage of quality.

The stranger stood silent for a while, then spoke in a half whisper:

"Greetings, *Umlungu*, and thou, *Inkoosiezana*."

The American rose and gravely returned the salutation.

"Thou comest late, *Induna*, for such I judge thy rank to be. What message is it that will not wait for the sun to rise above the Lebombos?"

"*Umlungu*," was the reply, "I have come to warn thee!"

"To warn me?" the American repeated. "What warning do we need, who are safe under the powerful hand of Dinizulu, the king? Truly, thou speakest in riddles."

"Yet I come to warn thee," the Zulu reiterated, not without dignity. "For I come but now from Dinizulu's counsel, where thy fate was discussed. And were it not that I am a friend of the whites, no word of what has passed at the *indaba* would ever have come to thine ears. Is it thy will that I proceed and show thee the road to life and safety? Or do I return whence I came, not having spoken, and shall your bones bleach in tomorrow's sun at the base of the mountain?"

Jack affected to smother a yawn.

"*Induna*, I am no child. Thy words do not frighten me, nor do they frighten the *Inkoosiezana*. Thou hintest that Dinizulu has decided upon our death. So be it. For we do not leave this kraal without that which we came to seek . . . Tell me, art thou perchance an emissary of the king himself?"

The man inclined his head.

"Even so, *Umlungu*. Dinizulu knows of my mission. For the heart of Dinizulu is soft, and he would not have thee slaughtered in cold blood. This then is the king's message: Leave the royal kraal by a road which I will have shown to thee. Thy wagons and mules will be delivered to thee at the *boma* by a trusted guard. Then travel west as fast as the mules will gallop and perchance the fleet footed *impie* will not overtake thee in the morning. I have spoken and, through me, the king."

The emissary ejaculated the last words imperiously, and his voice had the ring of power. The white man's eyes narrowed and he stared at the speaker intently. Then, with a grave courtesy that was in marked contrast to the rather flippant way in which he had first spoken, Jack answered quietly:

"Thus far, oh King of the Ama-Zulu, thy guise has served thee. Yet, the lion cannot hide for long in the *quagga* skin. Be seated, son of Cetewayo, while I stand before thee."

Slowly Dinizulu—for it was indeed the king—dropped his kaross.

"Thine eyes are sharp and see like the jackal's at night, *Umlungu,*" he remarked dryly. "I feared thou wouldst recognize me. Yet, now that we are face to face, we can talk plainly. Once more, do I urge thee to flee, and that quickly. Times have changed in Zululand, and no longer is the descendant of Chaka all powerful. Thou hast heard that traitor, Bambata, question my courage and authority, and behold, he yet lives! And I fear that to-morrow I will be unable to restrain the young warriors, and they will dip their assagais in your blood."

Dinizulu sighed heavily and shook his head. He continued:

"Ah, these men, they have not beheld the power of the white king, as I have. They do not know of the floating fortresses that belch flame and death, and of the great ships that carry men and more men, until he that stands against them, is overwhelmed and overthrown. I, who accompanied Cetewayo in his exile, know full well there was truth in your words, *Umlungu,* when you invoked the power of the white king. Therefore, I urge you again. Flee at once. I seek peace, not war, but my power fails to protect you."

The king ceased and stood silent. In his frank confession of helplessness he was a pathetic yet royal figure. Somehow Jack felt that he was dealing with a beaten man when he answered:

"King of the Ama-Zulu, I recognize our own danger and the difficulties which our coming has created for thee. Yet—I am sent by those who insist that the great gem, the missing half of the diamond, which was taken from our mines, be returned. Furthermore, let me show thee that the possession of this diamond places thee also in serious danger."

Dinizulu looked up quickly.

"Thou meanest?"

"I mean that, as long as the diamond remains in thy hands, Bambata, and all those who are with him in rebelling against thy authority, will urge thee to sell the diamond to Garcia, the Portuguese, in return for rifles and munitions. Therefore do I counsel thee. Remove that menace! Return the diamond to me, and I will see that thou art well rewarded. I promise that, if peace be maintained in Zululand, we shall stock thy kraals with the finest black and white cattle from beyond the Great Water—those beasts the Ama-Zulu so admire, and of which they have need to improve the old brand of longhorn cattle who pull so well in the yoke, yet give so little milk. Or, if fate so ordains, and exile comes to thee again, thou wilt have the goodwill of the white people, and a grant of land where thou mayest dwell in peace and security."

Dinizulu appeared sunk in thought. He seemed to hesitate, then asked:

"And thou hast power to do these things?"

Jack nodded.

"The Government at Pretoria has authorized me to speak thus to thee. Do I appear like one who speaks words that are false, oh Dinizulu?"

The king looked at him searchingly.

"Nay, thou speakest the truth. I would rather trust thee than Garcia, that jackal of Mozambique, who offers me rusty rifles and mouldy munitions. I must place trust where I can find it. So be it. I give thee the great diamond in return for the goodwill of thy people!"

With a sudden gesture his hand delved into the folds of his kaross, and brought forth an object at the sight of which the white man and woman gasped and cried out. It was the missing half of the Cullinan diamond! Uncut and unpolished, the great gem presented rather the appearance of a lump of rock salt than of the scintillating jewel it would become after passing through the hands of the master craftsmen at Amsterdam. Yet, rough and lumpy though it was, a turn of the lantern in Jack's hand caused hidden fires to flash with a sudden iridescence that seemed to illuminate the dark hut. Alma exclaimed in awed wonder and delight, whereupon Dinizulu handed her the gem with a gesture of native courtliness and gallantry that was, as a general rule, foreign to the Zulu race, which is notorious for a lack of reverence for womankind.

"The *inkoosiezana* admires the-stone-that-brings-light-in-the-darkness," he said poetically. "So be it. Radiance to radiance. She is a fit keeper for the gem. What sayest thou, *Umlungu?*"

Jack smiled. Nodding cheerfully he said.

"Yes, by all means, let the *inkoosiezana* carry the gem back to Pretoria. For we travel together, she and I, first back to the Transvaal, and then on through life!"

Dinizulu smiled faintly.

Jack took the splendid jewel and tried to close his hand around it, but the stone itself was almost the size of a man's fist.

"I held the other half of this stone in my hand when it was found in the Premier Mine," he said. "At first glance I would say that, what we have here, is the larger part. Also, the other half, which has now been split into three major brilliants for the royal crown of England, originally had a distinct flaw which was cleverly utilized by the Amsterdam cutters. But it seems to me that this half of the diamond is without any line or flaw whatsoever. Truly, Dinizulu, thou placest the Government of Pretoria in thy debt by returning this gem. This has been a good night's work for thee and the Ama-Zulu nation!"

"Slowly, *Umlungu,*" Dinizulu cautioned. "Thou art not yet safe. First we have to smuggle thee out of the kraal, and thereafter out of the country. Even *I* cannot save thee if Bambata and the young warriors discover thy flight. Therefore, follow me, and walk softly."

Dousing the light of the lantern, the man and woman quietly followed their guide. Outside the cabin they found their servants. Keeping in the shadows of the beehive huts where the Zulu nation snored and slumbered, Dinizulu noiselessly led the way to the stockade, which they followed to the far east corner of the kraal. Here was a small gateway used only by the household of the king for entering or leaving the kraal. Evidently Dinizulu could not count on the discretion or loyalty of the warriors guarding the main gateway, and preferred to pass his guests out through his own portals.

ONCE outside the kraal, they hastened toward the *boma*, or enclosure in which the Zulus safeguarded their cattle from lions, leopards and other prowlers. The *boma* was entirely surrounded by a thick hedge of thorn trees, with *ysterkout* gates. As they advanced a figure slid out from the darkness and approached the king. Dinizulu turned to Jack.

"This man I can trust," he whispered. "He reports that two of Bambata's men have been placed as a guard over the carts. The old jackal is suspicious that I may allow thee to leave. Therefore, kill these men."

Umbelini, who had edged close as Dinizulu spoke, here interposed.

"Let me go, *Inkoos,* and the Basuto with me. You cannot fire, so this is work for the stab assagai."

Jack nodded, and without another word the two Kaffirs disappeared into the darkness of the *boma*. The silence of the night was only broken by the snorting or stamping of oxen and other beasts, and the wait seemed interminable to Jack and the girl. They shuddered at the thought that death crept in the darkness of the *boma* upon two unsuspecting Zulu guards; yet they realized they had no choice. Presently Umbelini and the Basuto returned as noiselessly as they had gone, wiping the blades of their assagais on the long *tamboekie* grass.

"The road is open, *Inkoos,*" said Umbelini. He added grimly: "They made no outcry, and never looked upon the face of death until it kissed them."

Presently they found the Cape-carts and the mules tethered near by. Two still shapes, one with its face to the ground, the other on its back, lay staring with unseeing eyes, not far away.

Jack hurriedly drew Alma into the cart so that she would not see the gruesome sight. The Kaffirs worked swiftly and noiselessly, and the vehicles were soon inspanned. The contents of the carts had not been tampered with.

"Go slowly, *Umganaam,*" Dinizulu cautioned. "Have thy mules walk until they are well away from the kraal, so that their gallop does not awaken my people. And when thou arrivest in the capital city that lies like a bowl in the circle of the Magaliesberg, then do not fail to say to the *indunas* of the white king that thou owest thy life and the great gem thou bringest to the clemency of Cetewayo's son, who has defied the anger of his own *indunas* and their *impies*. Farewell. Go in peace."

Dinizulu stepped back. Every word he had spoken, every gesture, had been of a dignity that would not have been out of place in Buckingham Palace. The American was strangely impressed.

"Farewell, oh, son of Cetewayo, of Chaka and Dingaan! *Bayete,* King of the Ama-Zulu," Jack rejoined, coming as close to the Zulu way of praise, as he judged commensurate with the white man's standing. "I will indeed speak to my people of thy great generosity. And if the Ama-Zulu should rise against the whites, contrary to thy will, it shall be seen to that the work of this night weighs heavily in thy favor. *Bayete!*"

A touch of the *sjambok* and the mules started off at a slow trot over the grass grown veld. Soon they were clear of the *boma* and kraal, but they went slow for some miles before Jack laid the whip on the mules in earnest.

CHAPTER VIII

PURSUIT

IT WAS now near dawn, and Jack decided to push on throughout the day at whatever cost in order to put as many miles between his party and the pursuit which, he was certain, would follow. Telling Alma of his plans, he found her in complete accord. She had been singularly silent ever since Dinizulu had entered the hut to lead them from the kraal.

"I have neglected you shamefully, but we had to attend to business," Jack remarked lightly. She made no answer but laid her hand on his. He drew her close. A wisp of hair blew out from below her *kappie,* or Boer bonnet, and touched his cheek. Then, for a few seconds, the mules had their own way with the Cape-cart. Fortunately it kept on its course.

"This will never do," she teased, pushing him away. "Think of the shocking example you are setting to whatever *impala,* lions, leopards, and other denizens of the veld there may be about by this time." Coquettishly she drew away from his arm.

For a while they drove in silence.

"Tell me," said the girl at last, "are you not curious to know why I set out alone on this mission. Rather unusual for a girl, don't you think?"

"Yes, I am curious," Jack admitted. "But I trust you implicitly. You can tell me the whole story whenever you want to. And if you do not care to tell it ever, I will be just as well satisfied."

Again his arm sought to encircle her, but she eluded him once more, moving toward the end of the seat.

"And you are not afraid, after all I have done, that I will yet abscond with the diamond?" she asked.

"Hang the diamond!" Jack laughed. "However, it will be a great day for us when we bring it into the chief's office. Won't he open his eyes, though, when he sees the size of it!"

They lost themselves in day dreams.

At last she repeated:

"I must tell you why I embarked on this adventure."

Jack nodded.

"All right, I am listening. But nothing you say will make any difference to me." He touched the mules with the tip of the *sjambok,* and they put on a fresh spurt of speed, having lagged considerably for the past few minutes while their driver was otherwise engaged.

"As you know, my father and Garcia were partners in illicit diamond buying," the girl began. "Then dad found Garcia out, and each went his own way. By this time we had received word, through secret channels, that the missing half of the Cullinan diamond had been picked up. Nobody knew who had found it. It had been smuggled out of the mine—that was all. However, we heard that Garcia had an inkling of the gem's whereabouts and that he was moving heaven and earth to obtain possession of it.

"Just then dad was taken ill in Johannesburg. Day and night he lay tossing on his bed, worrying because the partner who had double-crossed him, was at liberty to follow the trail of the world's greatest gem. For my father is not merely a trader in diamonds; he is one of the greatest living gem experts and was, for years, connected with a large Amsterdam firm of *diamant slypers* (diamond cutters). He grieved that he had no son to join in the hunt for the great diamond.

"Then I conceived the idea to take my father's place and hunt for the diamond myself. But beyond the rumor that the gem was found and had been smuggled past the guards at Premier Mine, I knew nothing. All I could do was to sit with dad in his little room at the Goldfields Hotel in Johannesburg and nurse him back to health.

"At last one night an old Hottentot who had often acted as our go-between with the Kaffir workers in the diamond fields came to see us. Father was asleep, so old Hans, the Hottentot, told me his story. He said that the big diamond had indeed been found, and that it was now in the hands of Dinizulu.

"I knew then what to do. Dad would hear the truth sooner or later and, sick as he was, would leave for Zululand. So I took old Hans into my confidence and explained my plan. He agreed to stay with father and look after him, aided by an old Basuto woman.

"We were well supplied with money, so I immediately outfitted the expedition you know of, and which was swept away by the torrent in the *donga*."

"And how did you know that I was after the diamond?" Jack asked curiously.

The girl laughed.

"It was not hard to guess! In the first place, the Hottentot had told me that the Premier Mine people also suspected the whereabouts of the stone. A young American engineer, he said, had been sent by them to recover it. When you called at my camp your appearance and accent told me who you were. That's all—except that I am glad to have failed, and that you have won."

THE sun had climbed above the eastern kopjes, and they now entered a country of dense bushveld. This terrain made the going difficult. A regular wagon road there was not, and the carts had to be driven carefully along the narrow path, trod by Kaffirs through the tall grass and barely distinguishable in places. Numerous little *spruits* trickled through the bushveld, offshoots of larger streams with sources on the plateau to the west. Presently they came to one of these streams and found it near flood level, but still fordable.

Anxious to place as many miles as possible between his party and the country of the Zulus, Jack was on the point of driving his cart into the ford, when he was stopped by a loud shout from Umbelini, who was driving the second cart.

"Look out!" he yelled. "This is a bad *manzi* for crocodiles. Wait a bit."

The native drove his cart to the river-bank, and jumped out. Then Umbelini grasped his long whip and cracked it over the river, and the Basuto produced an empty paraffin tin and started beating a loud tattoo on it, creating a pandemonium fit to wake the dead.

"Stop it!" the white man shouted furiously. "What are you trying to do? That racket can be heard for miles and will bring the *impies* around our ears in no time. Are you crazy?"

The Bantus took no notice. Probably they did not even hear him. Instead they increased the din.

Cussing in English, Dutch and Zulu, Jack prepared to jump from the cart, intending to forcibly put a stop to the pandemonium. The girl placed her hand over his.

"Don't interfere," she said, her eyes laughing into his. "Don't you know what they are doing, you booby?"

Puzzled he stared at her.

"Blessed if I do. But I'm going to stop them. I think they are signaling to our pursuers."

"No, they are not," the girl retorted. Still laughing, she produced her revolver, and before he could restrain her, added to the row by rapidly firing six shots into the river.

Amazed, the American looked at her.

"What, you too," he gasped. "What in thunder is the matter?"

"Why, I thought you were a regular veld man," she answered mischievously. "Don't you know you cannot cross a crocodile haunted river in Africa without first making all the noise you can and scaring the beasts away? Why, if this river is really infested by crocs, before our carts got halfway across they would grab our mules!"

Somewhat crestfallen at being taught veld craft by a woman, Jack waited until the Kaffirs stopped their noise. Then they carefully drove the carts into the *manzi*. Halfway across, the mules lost their footing, being forced to swim a few yards, but the carts floated easily. Then the mules found their footing again, the wheels touched bottom, and with a final cracking of whips both carts reached the other side, swaying perilously over great rocks.

"Everything all right?" Jack called to Umbelini.

"Yes, *Inkoos*, but there are two more fords to be crossed soon," replied that worthy who seemed to know his Zululand like a book.

"That's pleasant," the white man muttered. "Hope Bambata's men don't catch up with us while we are crossing either of them."

They were now climbing a series of steep grades, the bush straggling up one kopje and down the next. The heat was terrific, and all about them, came the *zoom, zoom* of myriads of bush flies and the peculiar *tock, tockie* of the South African beetle.

Moreover, this was tsetse country of the worst kind and Jack felt relieved that his mules were salted, and rendered immune from the fatal results of the bite of the tsetse fly. Brief indeed, he knew, is the span of life vouchsafed in the bushveld to horses or mules that are not salted.

THOUGH the heat had now become stifling, Jack did not dare to outspan for the remainder of the day in the shade of the *wilge* near the river, welcome though this would have been to steaming mules and parched humans alike. The Zulu on the warpath, he knew, is an indefatigable runner, and will almost make as good time, zigzagging across the veld and taking the easier slopes over the kopjes, as a man on horseback. So he contented himself with ordering a few paraffin tins of river water poured over the mules at the next ford, which proved of easier passage than the one they had just negotiated.

Also he allowed the Kaffirs and himself a *soopie* of Cape brandy each. He knew well enough that South African law forbids white men to give liquor to natives; but then, civilization was far away, and he recognized the need of a little stimulant in its proper place and time, as many a white man had done, to his own salvation and that of his safari in the African wilderness before him.

The sun was still high when they climbed the highest kopje of the range.

"Look at the *stamvrugte!*" the girl cried, pointing to a clump of bush that shimmered fiery red in the sun. "Let's pick some, they are fine for thirst."

They stopped the carts and got out to pick the fruit—a sort of overgrown date, smooth and juicy, springing from a leafless stem.

"The Kaffirs like *stamvrugte*" said the girl, pointing to Umbelini and the Basuto, who were relieving one of the bushes of its succulent load. "Many a man lost on the bushveld has subsisted for days on them."

She was in the act of eating a *vrugt* when Jack suddenly saw her eyes dilate, as she looked beyond him. He wheeled around, revolver in hand, expecting to see a beast of the veld ready to spring.

"There, don't you see them?" she panted. "Coming down the side of the kopje yonder!"

Shading his eyes, Jack looked. At first he saw nothing but a sloping hillside, basking in the dazzling noonday sun. Then, as he got the range, he saw far away a straggling line of small figures, coming down a kopje at great speed.

For a moment he hoped it might be a band of the big baboons of the *bosveld*. But then he caught the glint of sun rays on assagai points.

"Quick, into the carts!" he ordered, helping his companion into the vehicle. "We've got to race them for our lives."

The short breathing spell had rested the mules, and presently both carts were dashing to the summit of the kopje. Umbelini's cart drew alongside as they reached the top.

"*Inkoos*, the big *manzi* (river) is at the foot of this kopje," he yelled, pointing to a line of silver bordered with green, a thousand feet below. "It is a large *manzi*, full of water at this time. The carts cannot go very fast, for if we do, the rocks will dash our wheels to pieces. I will run ahead to look for the ford and wait there for you."

The big Zulu vaulted from the cart and went speeding down the mountainside, jumping over boulders and ant hills. Following him as fast as the nature of the terrain would permit, they saw him stop, and slash at something in the *tam-*

boekie grass with his assagai. The next moment the carts had reached this spot. Glancing to one side, Jack saw a huge, black *mamba,* the African cobra, fully six feet long, still writhing in its death throes and threshing the grass with its tail. Evidently the Zulu had seen the reptile just in time to save himself from its deadly fangs, and had made quick work of it with his sharp blade.

A FEW more minutes of this jolting descent, during which Jack expected at any moment to hear the crash of a broken wheel, and they reached the first trees of the dense growth bordering the river. The transition from bright sunshine to the twilight of the jungle was so sudden that it took them a few seconds to make out their surroundings. They caught the reflection of water through the dense green, and then, noiselessly, Umbelini came and grasped the mules by the head.

"This way, *Inkoos,*" he whispered. "The *manzi* is high and the ford runs deep and fast."

"Go ahead," Jack ordered. "We have got to risk it and must get across somehow before the Zulus catch up with us."

Led by Umbelini, the carts had reached a spot where there was a dip in the steep riverbank. This was the only indication that the place was fordable.

The Zulu climbed back in his own cart. "*Inkoos,* this cart, with myself and the Basuto man, will go first. Keep thy rifle ready, for this river is reputed to swarm with the eaters-of-flesh-and-fish, the crocodiles."

He divested himself of his kaross, and the Basuto, yellow with fear, did likewise. Then, with a cut of his *sjambok,* Umbelini drove the mules into the water.

The animals lost their footing almost at once, and commenced to swim. Yet everything seemed to go well until the cart reached midstream. Then, without apparent cause, one of the mules screamed horribly and plunged. For a moment it plunged and reared its head above the surface then sank like a stone, drawing its team mate with it. The cart dipped and filled with water. For a second the tip of the white hood still showed above water, then also vanished.

"My God, the crocodiles got them!" the American shouted, horror-stricken. The girl swayed on her seat, covering her face with her hands.

Helpless, the white man watched the river. Then two heads broke the surface. The Bantus were swimming for their lives, making for the opposite bank.

The Basuto seemed the better swimmer, and was closest to land. Already he reached for a projecting root, when the thing happened. An object, looking like the animated trunk of a tree, dashed at the swimmer. Then the fearful jaws of a crocodile shot up from the depths and closed with an audible snap of the awful teeth about the body of the doomed Basuto. The rifles of the white man and woman spoke simultaneously, but their bullets glanced off the armored hide of the saurian. A red stain of the water, quickly fading into green, was the only indication of the tragedy. As usual, the crocodile had dragged its victim to some rocky ledge under the surface.

Sick with horror and loathing, Jack watched Umbelini's efforts to save himself. But the Zulu had also disappeared.

Then they heard a shout from the opposite bank, and there, dripping wet but safe, stood Umbelini. He wasted no time, but grasped a handful of stones and commenced throwing them with all his might into the water.

"*Inkoos,*" he shouted. "You must cross immediately and chance the crocodiles. Fire your rifles into the water, while I keep throwing rocks. The *impie* will be here in another minute!"

As if to emphasize his warning, something whizzed over their heads, then quivered into the ground right in front of the mules. It was an assagai. Jack could plainly see the handle wrapped with springbok skin. He lashed the mules, which were rearing back from the water panic-stricken, but they tried to turn and pull the cart around. For a moment it looked as if they would rush back on the trail, carrying the cart and its occupants into the midst of the oncoming Zulu warriors, whose shouts could now be heard on the outer fringe of the river jungle. Then came the sound of a shot, and a bullet, fired haphazard by someone armed in up-to-date fashion, plowed its way through the cart, passing miraculously between the man and woman but searing the flank of the left-hand mule. The animal sprang forward in pain, dragging its mate along, into the river. Once in the water they swam strongly.

CHAPTER IX

FIRE ON THE VELD

THE Zulus had now arrived at the river's edge and sighted their quarry. Assagais began to fall thick and fast, but, being thrown in haste, mostly fell into the water. As it happened, this veritable hail of assagais helped to scare the deadly crocodiles away. However, three assagais struck the cart. The point of one spear penetrated the hood and just pricked Jack's right arm. They were nearing land when Alma clutched Jack's arm and pointed to the water. There, not five yards from the right-hand mule was a huge crocodile, its immense jaws agape.

Jack leaned forward from the narrow Cape-cart, causing it to rock perilously. He waited till his rifle was almost flush with the oncoming monster, then pulled the trigger. It was the luckiest shot he ever fired, for the bullet entered the one vulnerable part of the crocodile's anatomy—the eye—and sped into the brain, killing it instantly. Yet, such had been the momentum of its rush, that the murderous brute brought up dead against the flank of the mule. Still, the bullet had gone home so unerringly that there was none of the terrific tail thrashing that marks the death throes of the crocodile, and the carcass drifted away downstream, belly up. The next instant Umbelini had hold of the *distelboom* of the cart and was guiding the trembling mules up the bank and into a thicket of jungle.

"A narrow shave, that!" Jack exclaimed to his companion. He was relieved to see that she had come through it all unharmed. "Well, so far, so good."

The thicket hid them from the enemy across the river and Umbelini voiced his opinion that the Zulus would not cross in a like manner because they are mortally afraid of the crocodile in its own element. Yet they decided to take an observation, and, jumping from the cart, rifles in hand, the two men hastened back to the river bank.

"You wait here," Jack told Alma, waving her back into the cart, as she made to follow.

The Zulus, a hundred strong were running up and down along the river bank. Evidently they were trying to locate a shallow crossing. As their search proved vain, they were gathering about a tall *induna* who appeared to be holding a council of war with two lesser chiefs. And just then a white man wearing a helmet and carrying a rifle broke his way through the undergrowth and joined the Zulu chiefs.

Jack immediately recognized him.

"It's Garcia!" he swore. "The dirty jackal, chasing two white people with a Zulu *impie!*" Thoroughly enraged, he raised his rifle, and fired across the river at the *indaba*. The shot went high, passing over Garcia's shining headpiece, but the American grinned with satisfaction when he saw the Portuguese turn and run for shelter. Though not so precipitate as Garcia, the Zulu chiefs, like wise men, also took cover.

Suddenly Jack became aware that Alma had joined them, rifle in hand.

"If there is going to be a fight I will be in it," the girl announced coolly, as he started to remonstrate. "The Zulus are sure to attempt a crossing, and three rifles are better than two. Moreover, I can shoot as well as you."

He had to admit her logic, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Better take cover," he said. "Garcia has a rifle."

"Garcia!" she exclaimed, and grew pale. Evidently the Portuguese held more terror for her than the Zulus.

"Yes, Garcia. I saw him a minute ago."

She made no further comment, but posted herself behind a bush, with as steady a hand on the trigger as an old veteran.

For a brief second nothing disturbed the calm of the tropical afternoon. Then yelling like fiends, the Ama-Zulu dashed from cover, charging straight into the river. Evidently their *indunas* had ordered them to get across, whatever the cost.

On they came in three single files. The two outsides files, Jack noticed, tried to find footing in the water while they beat the stream with their assagais and shouted at the top of their voices, to scare the crocodiles. The Zulus in the center file, however, swam strongly, using their great oxhide shields to keep afloat. Jack saw that they were bound to win through, even if some were taken by the crocodiles.

"We are wasting time," he cried. "Back to the cart, and away. Just give them one volley."

The rifles cracked and one of the lesser chiefs threw up his arms and disappeared. The other shots also found their mark, for two more heads sank below the surface. Grasping Alma by the hand, Jack ran back to the cart with her. Umbelini led the mules through the river jungle and then also climbed in. Presently they reached open country, and were away before the pursuit broke from the trees.

THE veld here was of a level character, consisting of large spaces interspersed with little clumps of bush and trees. It had the general appearance of the *lage* veld of the Transvaal. Taking care to avoid the tall anthills, they bowled along at a good speed, soon outdistancing the fleetest runners of the Ama-Zulu. The route here led through a long, narrow valley, bordered by a low range of kopjes on either side. The going over the unbroken, grassy plain was easy and Jack felt confident of outstripping the Zulu runners. He therefore allowed the mules to slacken speed.

But this sense of security received a severe shock when suddenly a horseman came up behind them, following the crests of the hills to the right. The rider, mounted on one of the shaggy Basuto ponies, famous for their endurance, presently passed them with a wild shout, waving his hand derisively.

"By God, it's Garcia!" Jack swore. "He is the only mounted man among that gang, I'll bet. The Zulus have no horses. Wonder what his game is? He cannot hope to head us off and stop us single-handed."

"You may be sure he has thought of some scheme," the girl answered. "He probably plans to waylay us, shoot our mules, and give the Zulus a chance to catch up with us."

Jack set his lips grimly.

"There's no place for an ambush that I can see," he said. "If we keep to the center of the valley the distance is too great for him to venture a shot from the hillside. He must be up to some other deviltry, and we must keep a sharp lookout. What do you think of it, Umbelini?"

The Zulu shook his head. The appearance of Garcia on horseback puzzled him.

"I cannot say, *Inkoos,*" he replied. "There are no tribes of the Ama-Zulu living where this man is riding, so he cannot be riding for help to head us off. And if he alone means to give battle to you and me, we know what the outcome will be." And the tall Zulu proudly brandished the rifle Jack had handed him at the ford.

So they raced on, catching sight of Garcia as he topped one kopje after another, until he passed from view.

The kopjes on either side had now lost their gently undulating character. Steep, rocky slopes and ledges here rose sheer from the plain. Little clumps of bush, and isolated *untombe* trees began to multiply, indicating that they were entering upon a stretch of middle veld. Umbelini watched for a possible ambush, though the *bos* was yet too low and spare to shelter a man and his horse.

Suddenly one of the mules lifted its head, as if sniffing the air. Looking at the Zulu, Jack noticed that Umbelini was doing likewise. He felt a vague fear, but did not speak. For another mile the valley stretched in a straight line, and this distance they covered in a few minutes, racing along at top speed. Then came a sharp bend between the hills, and with it knowledge of their peril. Far ahead the bright, azure perspective of the African late afternoon had become a dirty gray mist, and a pungent smell of smoke was in the air.

Alma looked at the grim faces of the two men.

"He has fired the veld!" she said.

"Yes, the dirty dog has fired the *tamboekie* grass," Jack answered. "His strategy is to drive us back into the hands of the Zulus. But we will go straight ahead. We'll watch for a break in the hills, and get out of the path of the fire in time."

Scanning the kopjes on either side, they searched for an opening as the Cape-cart dashed along the walls of granite. The atmosphere was becoming more smoke-laden, and evidences of the fire, fanned by a strong wind, multiplied. A herd of *sassabies,* fleetest of all South African buck, dashed by in single file, ears laid back like running hares. Denser and blacker grew the smoke, and through it, passing within a few yards, raced two full-grown zebras with their foals, in such anxiety to reach sanctuary that they never seemed to notice the humans that crossed their path. The cloud of smoke seemed to rise and settle with the wind, and out of it came yet more fleeing denizens of the veld.

"Look, *Inkoos!*" said Umbelini, and pointed to the left.

There, loping along within a hundred yards, clearing the clumps of bush in easy, swinging strides, were two lions, yellow as dust, traveling away from danger and seemingly indifferent to the fact that a herd of springbok, fat and sleek with good pasture, were going the same way in close proximity.

All about them the animal world was on the move, routed and panic-stricken, and it was all the little party of three could do to push forward. Yet, Jack reasoned, it was better to face a thin strip of fire advancing rapidly over the sparse veld than to turn back and meet certain death at the assagais of the Ama-Zulu. To this the girl, as well as Umbelini, gave unqualified assent, as they strained smarting eyes to pierce the smoky mist which rolled ever closer and thicker.

IT HAD by now become evident that they would either have to leave the cart and mules in the valley, and save themselves by a mad scurry up the precipitous sides of the nearest hills, or that they must come to a halt and burn a stretch of land for protection, thereby creating a zone of safety in the midst of a sea of fire. It would be folly, they realized, to abandon the cart and mules, and allow the Zulus to hunt them over the hills afoot. The alternative, therefore, was to stand their ground and burn a patch of veld for themselves.

Bringing the cart to a standstill, they jumped out. They secured the mules and started a dozen small fires going in a circle. In the center of the resulting island of black ashes, the two men and the woman took their stand, watching the on-coming fire.

Out of the smoke dashed animals of all kinds—blesbok and rietbok, koodoo and hartebeest. Many of these did not keep to the center of the valley, but rushed up the steep slopes of the granite kopjes and disappeared over the crest of the hills. But most of the game seemed actuated by but one thought: to get away in a straight dash from the demon that roared and crackled behind them; and to such the straight and even plain of the valley appeared the safest course.

The wind seemed to gather volume, the smoke rolled in closer, and the frightened mules attempted to pull out of the shafts.

Impala, duiker and steenbok rushed by, almost touching each other, and swerving but ever so little to avoid contact with the cart and mules. Came *meerkat* and, like a streak of spotted lightning, a huge specimen of a pale eyed leopard, spitting like an overgrown cat, but too stricken with fear to show fight. Jack turned to watch, and saw the huge feline swerve, dash up the steep hillside, clear a group of chattering baboons with a ten foot jump, and then disappear over the summit.

"What a chance for some fancy shooting," the American murmured. "I never saw that much game at one time. However, we all are fighting the elements today, and I am not going to break the truce."

He had hardly spoken when Alma lifted her rifle and fired pointblank at some object on the ground, almost under his feet. Completely taken by surprise, Jack jumped as if the shot had hit him.

"What on earth are you doing?" he shouted.

The girl pointed.

"We are almost even, and it's tit for tat for saving each other's lives," she smiled. Yet her voice shook.

He looked. There, not two feet away, writhing horribly, was a huge specimen of the black *mamba*, its hooded head shot to a pulp by the girl's unerring aim. One glance showed how close the man's escape from certain death at the fangs of the serpent had been. Evidently the big snake had raced out of the grass, spurred by the fire and, finding the open spot occupied by humans, had shown fight.

Jack wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"You have paid in full for that little matter of the *donga*," he answered. "Another second and the brute would have bitten me. Wow!" Picking it up by the tail, he threw the thing of horror into the grass on the edge of the clearing.

The wall of flames was almost upon them. Umbelini had thrown his kaross over the heads of the mules, hoping to calm them, but this device, which works so well with horses, had little effect.

With eyes smarting from the smoke, they watched the fire burning ever nearer. Now it had reached the edge of the clearing and seemed, for a moment, to leap high into the air. Then suddenly the flames ahead of them died away, while those on either side of the clearing rushed onward like disciplined warriors, leaving a burnt and smoky desolation as far as the eye could see.

Jack turned to the girl.

"Up in the cart with you," he said, lifting her in his arms. "We've got to travel. The Zulus will conclude that we have taken to the hills, as they themselves are likely to do. Of course, they may also believe that we have been burned to death, but that is not likely. Let's get going. And, by the way, we ought to meet Senhor Garcia now, at any time. He thinks no doubt that we turned back before the fire, and are now safely held by his Zulu allies."

The ashes of the burnt *tamboekie* grass were still hot underfoot, and bushes and tree trunks smouldered on all sides. A veritable army of *aasvogels*—vultures—flew low overhead, searching for carrion. The cart passed one of the tall ant hills, glowing redhot like a Dutch oven. Near by they found the carcass of a big koodoo, one of its hoofs still embedded in the porcupine hole into which it had stumbled in headlong flight. The poor beast had broken its leg and, unable to rise, was overtaken by the flames and roasted alive.

The mules raced over the smoking plain for another six miles before the occupants of the Cape-cart discerned the green line where the burnt area ceased, and the veld resumed its natural appearance.

"This is about where our friend Garcia fired the veld," Jack said. "He ought to be not far away. Let's watch for him. Nothing would give me more pleasure than to take a shot at the gentleman."

Umbelini said nothing, but the manner in which he grasped his rifle and narrowed his eyes boded no good to the Portuguese.

It was getting dark rapidly and the sun had sunk behind the kopjes when Umbelini caught sight of Garcia.

"There, *Inkoos,* shoot!" he shouted, blazing away with his own rifle.

For a second Jack saw the Portuguese clearly, as seated on his horse, he stood sharply outlined against the background of setting sun and mountain top. Evidently Umbelini had missed. Before Jack could fire, the Portuguese whirled his horse around and was gone.

"That means the Zulus will know we're still alive and traveling," the American said. "We must keep moving most of the night."

CHAPTER X

IN THE CLUTCHES OF THE ZULUS

AND keep moving they did, with a vengeance. What followed was one of the hardest trips they had ever made on the veld. They had to travel slowly and with the utmost care, for the veld soon became a veritable succession of marshy valleys intersected by numerous rivulets. Luckily none of these were of great depth and all afforded an easy crossing. Yet the night was pitch black and the mules repeatedly ran full tilt into the bush, or came to a standstill before the weird conglomerations of giant ant hills. And, on one occasion, they became entangled in the branches of one of the great thorn trees that grew in profusion hereabouts. It was only when the animals reared back in pain, with the white needles sticking into their sides, that the occupants of the cart realized the nature of the obstacle in their way, whereupon it took a great deal of careful maneuvering to free the cart.

The *bosveld* at last became so dense that further progress in the dark became impossible. So they decided to outspan on a little knoll. Umbelini, on reconnoitering, reported a river below.

Having hardly eaten anything all day, they made as satisfactory a meal as possible on some dry biscuits and a few strips of hard *biltong* or sun dried flesh of the *impala*. But the salt *biltong* always causes a raging thirst, and the slaking of this thirst almost resulted in disaster.

The two men had gone down to the river with a paraffin tin. It was planned that Umbelini would fill this with water while the white man watched the bank for lurking crocodiles, the saurian being particularly dangerous at night when he watches for the game that comes down to drink. Alma had remained on top of the knoll with the transport. The men had just filled the container and were preparing to ascend the knoll when the sound of two shots, followed by a deafening roar, reached them.

"My God, it's a lion!" Jack shouted and dashed up the kopje.

"No, *Inkoos*. A *tijger*," Umbelini shouted back, his practiced ear having recognized the voice of the nocturnal visitor. Fearful of the safety of the girl, Jack dashed through the bush, unable to see where he was going. Then a huge shape shot through the darkness and, with a tremendous smash, collided with him. Down Jack went, rolling clear of whatever it was that had struck him. Regaining his feet, he rejoined Alma who was struggling to keep the frantic mules from bolting.

"A huge leopard," she panted. "It must have been treed in that *umtombe* over there, for I saw it drop from the tree onto the cart and then spring on the mules. It had hardly landed when I shot. The beast jumped clear in the air, and I fired again when it hit the ground. I guess I did not miss either time."

She was as proud as punch over her exploit, and Jack admired her sang-froid.

"You're a wonderful shot," he said, patting her on the shoulder. "But I do not think you killed the leopard. At least, it had enough life left to knock the wind out of me when it came charging downhill."

Just then Umbelini rejoined them.

"The *tijger* is dead, *Inkoosiezana,*" he announced. "Two shots; one through the neck, and one through the back." He turned back into the bush, and presently returned, dragging along a wonderful specimen of the big African leopard, or *tijger*, as the Boers call it. Without more ado, the imperturbable Zulu busied himself in skinning the animal.

"All's well that ends well," Jack pronounced sententiously. "But I am worried about those shots. If the Zulus were within fifteen miles they must have heard them. However, we are in the heart of the bushveld, so we must wait for the dawn. And we had better start a fire going to keep any stray lion or leopard at a distance. They are crazy about mule flesh."

They made two large fires, trusting that the dense bush would mask the glow. Then, having arranged to take the second watch over from Umbelini, and having made Alma as comfortable as possible, Jack dropped off to sleep.

Two hours before daybreak the Zulu woke him up to stand his watch. Nothing, he said, had happened, except that there were plenty of jackals about in the bush, attracted, no doubt, by the smell of the mules. But as long as they kept the fire going with the dry branches, of which he had collected a large heap, there was no danger that these cowardly scavengers of the bush would attack the mules, the Zulu said. Then, with a prodigious yawn, he wrapped himself in his kaross, and was immediately fast asleep.

JACK seated himself on a log near the fire and, rifle in hand, let his thoughts roam. Everything was shaping for the best, he mused. His mission, provided they could continue to give the Zulus the slip, was a complete success, from the point of view of his employers as well as himself. For he was bringing home the bacon in the form of the huge diamond, the largest ever beheld by man, which now rested safely in the leather case the girl had carried with her into the wilderness. And, for himself, he was bringing out of the depths of Zululand this lovely woman to be his bride. For a while he lost himself in daydreams.

Then he looked back again at the fire—and into the muzzle of a six-shooter. The hand that held the six-shooter, and held it unwaveringly, was Garcia's!

"Hands up, Yankee!" the Portuguese ordered abruptly. "And don't try any tricks. I mean business."

The American had no choice but to obey. Garcia glanced at the sleeping forms of the white woman and the Zulu, then, turning to his captive, said in a low voice:

"No need to wake them up just yet. There are some things I have to say to you. But first let me take your rifle, and the rifles of your friends. There, that's excellent. Now you may put down your hands, but please keep them in full view while we talk, for I'm of a nervous temperament. In fact, I am liable to shoot at you, my friend, if I cannot see what your hands are doing."

There was deadly menace in the voice of this man whose record for cold-blooded murder was no secret, and Jack decided that this was not the time for heroics. He folded his arms and leaned back nonchalantly.

"Have your say," he drawled. "I'm a good listener."

The Portuguese smiled and then said:

"I am glad, senhor, that you realize your position. Believe me, I have no ill feeling for you. Why should I? Until our meeting at Dinizulu's kraal, I had never even seen you. You merely happen to be on the same quest as I, and there our interests clash. Naturally, I intend to have the diamond—that magnificent gem, the greatest the world has ever seen." His eyes glistened.

"Come, senhor, I offer you a fair exchange. You can have the girl. Ah, I know you love her! As to myself—whatever sentiment I may have had for her in the past, is now dead. But you know my reputation among those connoisseurs of precious stones whom the South African Government is pleased to call by the harsh name of illicit diamond buyers. I proudly admit that reputation is deserved, for Manuel Garcia has but one mistress, she of the dazzling light.

"What do I care for the light in woman's eyes when I can have the splendors that shine and dazzle from the innermost depths of a gem like the Cullinan? Women? Pah! The world is wide, and—what is that your proverb says—the beach, it has many pebbles? But diamonds, my friend, are rare. And of this diamond that you have in your possession there is but one counterpart, and that, I regret to say, is too well guarded, in the Tower of London.

"Ah, I have stood in the Tower of London, where they keep the crown jewels, and I have seen the splendor of the stones that composed the great Cullinan. Even then I knew the Cullinan was but the smaller half of a great gem, such a gem as the world has never seen before, and will, in all human probability, never set eyes on again. And that day, in murky, drizzling London, I swore that when the larger half of the Cullinan was at last found, it would never become part of the collection which I saw guarded by those stolid Beef Eaters in the Tower. Never, I swore, would it fall into other hands than mine!"

GARCIA had ceased and was glancing sharply at the American. His eyes shone with a mad fire and his hands trembled with excitement, causing the revolver to waver up and down uncomfortably.

"The man must be crazy," Jack thought.

Garcia must have read his mind, for he burst out again:

"I fear, senhor, you think I am demented. Perchance I am—on this subject. Yes, I am monomaniac on the matter of this great diamond, and you know it is dangerous to trifle with a man of one idea."

He had hardly raised his voice, but now leaned forward, all assumed raillery gone.

"Come, senhor, your reply. Time flies. The Zulus are not far away. What must I do: shoot you and the fair lady asleep over there, and your black servant; or will I give you a chance for your lives after you hand over the diamond to me? Quick, answer!"

He leveled the revolver at the American's forehead. Jack cudgeled his brains in vain for a way out. Surrender the diamond and the trust it stood for? Alone, for himself, he would have jumped for Garcia's throat. But he knew that he was dealing with a dangerous and determined maniac, and the perspiration ran down his face as he imagined the drama about to take place, the bullets that were to crash into his own brain, that were to kill the woman he loved. How could he gain time? Capture by the Zulus would be preferable, he thought. Wildly, and at random, he asked:

"Why kill us? Your Zulu allies will be here shortly, when you can turn us over to them and keep the diamond for yourself."

Garcia laughed derisively.

"You must be a fool, *amigo*. That *impie* is just as determined to get the diamond as I am. These Zulus are getting educated. They know that the diamond, to them, means rifles and munitions to fight the whites. Why, when Dinizulu announced that he had turned over the diamond to you, they nearly killed him, their king, on the spot! Fine chance I would have to get that stone! Come, I am going to count three."

Jack saw that he had played his last card and must choose between surrender of the gem or death for Alma, himself and Umbelini. He gave in.

"You win," he said. "Let me waken the lady and ask her for the stone, which she has in her keeping."

"Stay where you are," the Portuguese ordered. "I will ask her for it myself."

Keeping him covered, Garcia approached the sleeping girl and touched her with his boot. She awoke suddenly and saw the Portuguese standing over her.

She went pale as death.

"*You!*" she screamed, awaking Umbelini, who jumped up, casting about for his rifle. The Portuguese stepped back quickly, covering the three of them with his revolver.

"Yes, madame, it's I, Garcia, your old friend and admirer," he sneered. "But I have just told your Yankee friend that he need not consider me in the light of a rival. Doutbless, that is agreeable to you. All I want now is the diamond, and I want it quick! Please hand it to me before I count three and start shooting. The American will receive the first shot in case you refuse. One! Two——"

The girl looked wildly at Jack, then back at the Portuguese and at the revolver in his hand.

"Stop, stop!" she cried, tugging at her riding habit. "You shall have the diamond, don't shoot."

Garcia made no mistake and did not offer the chance Jack had been hoping for. Not for a second did his eyes leave the two men, nor did he lower the revolver.

"Open it and show me the stone," he ordered.

She opened the bag and held the stone up for the Portuguese to see. Garcia laughed exultantly.

"It's the other half of the Cullinan, indeed!" he exclaimed, and his voice seemed almost friendly, as if inviting them to rejoice with him. "Now you close the bag and hand it to me."

The girl obeyed, but as she stepped forward, stumbled, narrowly missing the fire. The bag fell from her hands and she bent to pick it up.

"Careful, you fool!" the Portuguese shouted furiously, looking down at her for the fraction of a second, but immediately raising his eyes again to watch Jack and Umbelini. "Hand me that bag without any further tricks or I'll shoot the three of you."

She held out the bag to him, and he snatched it from her hand. Then, dropping it in his coat pocket, he backed away to the spot where he had stacked the three rifles. Still keeping them covered, he heaved each weapon far into the bush.

"You can look for them after I am gone," he jeered. "And don't try to rush me, my friends."

Walking backwards to the edge of the clearing he reached his horse and sprang into the saddle. He smote his horse with the flat of his hand, and, as it jumped forward, fired a warning shot pointblank. The bullet passed wide over Jack's head, but, as the sound died away, it was answered with wild shouts close at hand.

"The Zulus!" Jack cried. Dragging Alma with him, he bundled her into the Cape-cart. Umbelini had bounded forward and was busy removing the *kneehalsters* from the mules and unfastening the *riems.* The next instant they went crashing down the hillside, through the bush and over the boulders, then miraculously found themselves crossing the shallow river. A moment later they were dashing up the bank and away.

BUT the Zulus were close behind, and the going uphill was hard on the high wheels. Twice they struck heavy stones with an impact that threw the cart sideways. Jack looked back and saw the Zulus close behind, tall men in full war dress, karosses flying from their shoulders, and ostrich feathers stuck in their head rings. The Zulus were running easily up the steep grade and, realizing that their quarry could not escape this time, did not even attempt to throw assagais. Umbelini lashed the mules to greater speed, while Jack bitterly cursed the Portuguese who had thrown their rifles into the bush.

Disaster came after another hundred yards when the Cape-cart struck a projecting stone and with a splintering crash broke a wheel. Another minute and the Zulus swarmed about them. Assagais were lifted threateningly as the warriors crowded in upon them. Jack put his arm around the girl, thinking this was the end.

But the *impie* was well disciplined, and the warriors did not, as yet, attempt violence. Evidently they were awaiting the arrival of someone in authority. A tall *induna* at last appeared and ordered the captives led before him. This *induna* was brief, businesslike and to the point.

"*Umlungu,* where is the stone-that-shines-with-a-thousand-lights which our father Dinizulu gave thee?" he questioned, leaning on his oxhide shield.

Jack looked around the circle of threatening, ocher daubed faces.

"It was stolen from us by the man they

call Garcia, oh *Induna* of the Ama-Zulu," he answered, and wondered whether he would be the first to feel the sharp point of the assagais.

It was gradually growing lighter, and already the kopjes took on a rose hued tint. Dawn was near.

The *induna* evidently thought the white man was lying and regarded him with a baleful eye.

"Thou shalt tell me where thou hast hidden the stone," he announced calmly, then lifted his assagai and pressed it against the captive's abdomen. "Now, *Umlungu,* where is the stone, or must I drive my spear into thy bowels?"

Faint and nauseated, Jack closed his eyes. Then, suddenly, he felt the assagai snatched away, and knew that Alma had thrown herself before him and was holding the assagai with both hands, pressing it against her breast. She was speaking vehemently and urgently in Zulu, and was telling the *induna* over and over again how Garcia had surprised them in their camp and had fled with the diamond. The shot they had heard, she said, was fired by the Portuguese as he rode away.

Watching the *induna's* face, Jack saw that the chieftain was impressed and that belief was slowly growing on him. He lowered his assagai, and his eyes searched the fringe of bush along the river. Evidently he reasoned that, as the Portuguese had not been observed riding up the slope, he must still be skulking in the bush. He issued a short command toward the river, to search the bush.

But, as the Zulus doubled back, a man on horseback was seen to dash from the bush, some half a mile away. At this the entire *impie,* including the *induna* and the Zulus guarding the three prisoners, turned and gave chase. Just then the sun rose in its splendor above the eastern kopjes.

"Leave the cart and ride the mules," Jack shouted. He threw a blanket, folded double, over one of the mules and secured it with a *riem* by way of girth strap. He turned to Umbelini.

"You take the other mule. The *Inkoosiezana* and I together will ride on this one."

The Zulu shook his head.

"Nay, *Inkoos,* you take the one *muilezel* and let the *Inkoosiezana* ride the other. I will run beside you, holding on to a *riem.* There is not one among those yonder that can outrun me. Moreover, one *muilezel* could not carry two people."

CHAPTER XI

THE GREAT DIAMOND

THEY wasted no more words, they mounted. Garcia was heading northeast, with the Zulus in full cry after him, so they headed due west. Reaching the rim of the kopje Umbelini stopped and pointed.

"The Baas Garcia is down," he called. "I saw his horse stumble."

They looked, and true enough, Garcia was dismounted. He stood beside his horse, raining blows on the poor beast which had stepped into one of the many *aardvark* holes, probably breaking a leg. For a moment the Portuguese seemed undecided, then started running down the slope to the valley. A few seconds later the first of the Zulus appeared on the kopje, silhouetted against the rising sun. They spotted their quarry almost at once and gave a yell which carried to the three spectators watching the drama from afar. The Portuguese was now running downhill with a speed almost unbelievable in so heavy a man. Yet the Zulus, following in long easy strides, jumping over rocks and boulders which the white man had to circle, gained on him all the while. One tall young warrior, his plume of ostrich feathers waving in the breeze, was far in the lead. The Portuguese glanced over his shoulder just as the Zulu threw his assagai. Garcia ducked, whirled around and fired. Down went the warrior. Then the Portuguese dashed off again.

But the fate that had overtaken their comrade did not stop the Zulus, and they gained on Garcia with every stride. He whirled about once more and fired, but the shot went wild. Then the throw assagais began to fall in profusion about the fugitive, but he seemed to bear a charmed life. He stumbled and fell, but was up again in a second. But now the drama drew to a close. The Zulus were only a few yards behind, and it was plain that Garcia was exhausted. He doubled like a hare before the hounds, and then at last the *impie* overhelmed him!

The onlookers caught the gleam of assagais, flashing in the sunlight, and then nothing was seen but a milling mass of plumed warriors.

"Quick, quick, let's be off before they discover that he did not have the diamond," the girl called to Jack.

She pulled her mule around and rode down the slope. He followed, puzzled by her words, with Umbelini holding onto the leather *riem* and keeping up, without visible effort, with the stride of the mules. Soon they reached the flat veld of the plain. Far on the horizon were other kopjes but those were at least fifteen miles away, and the intervening distance was all in favor of equestrians, as contrasted with the Zulu runners, however fleet the latter might be. Looking back from time to time, Jack saw the Zulus run down the slopes after them. However, as they reached the plain, they came to a halt. When he looked again, he saw that the *impie* had realized the futility of further pursuit, and were retracing their way up the hillside. However, wishing to place as many miles as possible between his little party and the *impies* of Dinizulu, Jack did not call a halt until they had traversed the fifteen miles of veld.

There, at the foot of a *poort* between two towering kopjes they found a shady spot in a wooded *kloof*. The place was watered by a *spruit*, so they decided to rest and water the mules. Umbelini led the animals to the water, and Jack and Alma were left alone. The girl had been silent throughout the ride, and Jack, depressed at the loss of the diamond and dreading the thought of appearing with empty hands before those who had sent him to Zululand, had not spoken a word.

As he stood, lost in thought, the girl came to him.

"And so your dangerous quest was a failure after all, my dear," she said softly, patting his arm.

He shook his head.

"Yes, we have had no luck," he admitted.

The girl sighed.

"If you had only not been burdened with me, I think you would have won through. And so you have had all your hardships for nothing at all."

He looked up sharply.

"Don't say that! I have won you, and that is more than all the diamonds in Africa. Still—I would have liked to walk into Sir Thomas' office and put the great diamond before him on his big desk."

He dropped his head, fatigued and weary. Suddenly the girl's arm crept around his neck, and then she covered his eyes with her hand.

"This is a game," she said. "Don't look. Now hold out your hand."

Mystified, he obeyed. Then he felt her place some heavy object in the palm of his hand.

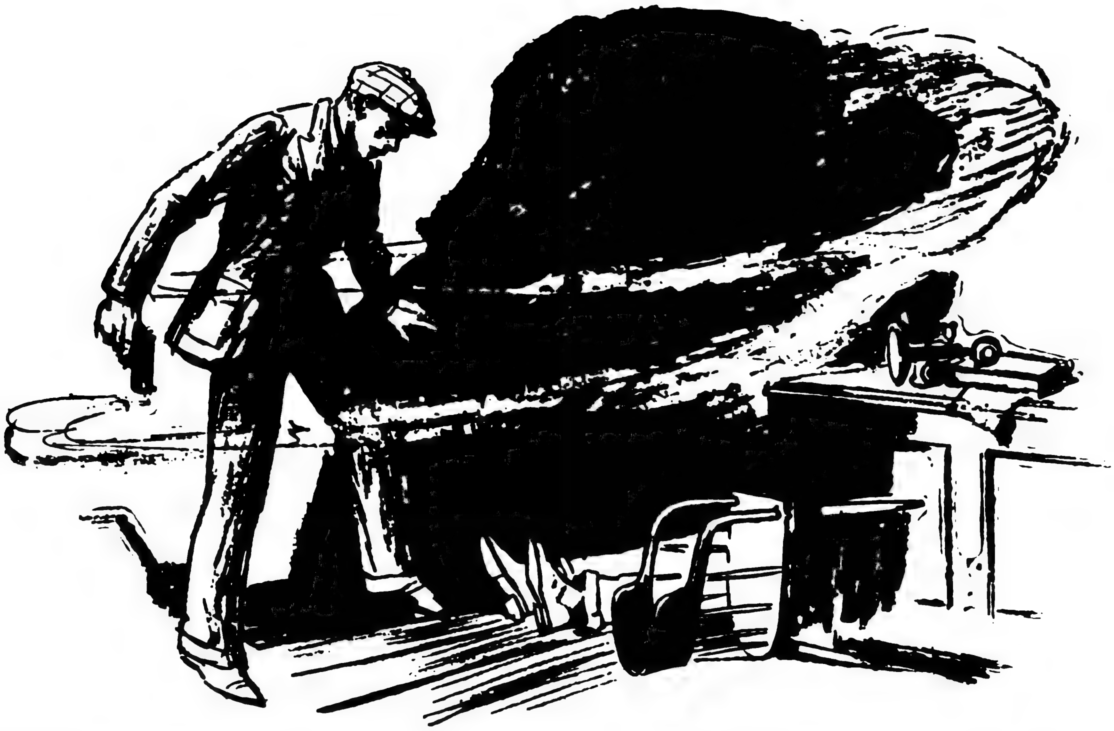
"Now you may look," she said, triumphant laughter in her voice. He looked, and there in his hand lay the splendid diamond he had believed lost with Garcia! The girl laughed delightedly as she beheld his astonishment.

"Now aren't you surprised?" she cried, her voice trembling between tears and laughter. "How did it happen? Oh, easy enough! You remember I stumbled and dropped the bag? The light was poor and the flames of the fire danced up and down, making it hard to see what I was doing. I know something of sleight-of-hand tricks, you know. Used to perform at charity bazaars in Kimberley, so it was not difficult to slip the diamond out of the bag, hide it in my dress as I bent over, and replace it with an ordinary stone. Garcia was afraid to take his eyes, or his revolver, off you, and he never discovered the trick. That's all."

Jack stood silent, transported with joy. Still he did not speak, but words were not needed. His arms closed around her. Thus Umbelini found them when he returned.

AT THE Premier Mine, near Pretoria, as at De Beer's in Kimberley, are great vaults in which is stored treasure sufficient to ransom all the kings of the earth. Here are kept a great store of the world's finest diamonds. These gems are marketed at long intervals. Were they offered to the world en masse, the diamond market would be shaken to its very foundations.

From time to time, visitors are led through these vaults by special dispensation. They exclaim with wonder and delight at the sight of these splendid gems of purest water. Then, as a climax to the marvelous spectacle, they are shown that greatest of all gems, "the other half of the Cullinan," and are told the story of its rescue from Dinizulu's *impies*.



THE MAN *for* THE JOB

A Brief Drama of the Underworld

By CLEMENTS RIPLEY

BENNY MOON had just played a neat combination that put the five ball into the corner pocket and was considering his next shot, when someone laid a hand on his arm.

He turned to find Sam Slattery, the manager of the pool room, at his elbow.

"The Works wants to see you," was the news he bore.

Benny stared at him.

"He wants to see *me?*"

"'S what he said."

"Gees! You know what for, Sam?"

"Uh-uh. Better chase over and find out. He's over to his office—the Marietta Club. You know he don't like to be kept waitin'."

Benny racked his cue and put on his coat. He adjusted the straw hat, with the band of a crack British regiment, a little on one side and pulled down his lavender shirt cuffs. The Works—Gees!

You might have taken him for a chorus man as he stepped out into the street, slim, with a dancer's grace of movement and a clean cut, regular profile. He looked twenty, which he was, and rather youthfully inexperienced—due to a queer, wistful trick of his eyebrows—which he was not, being an alumnus of the toughest public school in the city, the Parental School, and the State Reformatory. His present occupation was shooting taper dice with suckers and doing odd jobs for the organization, whose head was the almost legendary figure of The Works.

Benny knew The Works by sight. Who didn't? That slight, gray man who sat alone in the tonneau of an imported touring car, with the stem of a straight pipe gripped between his teeth, and eyes that looked straight ahead. He had never spoken to him in his life—never expected to. When The Works wanted things done he spoke through his executives and presently they were done.

And now The Works had sent for Benny Moon.

As he walked rapidly in the direction of the Marietta Club, Benny revolved his possible misdeeds in his mind. The worst thing he could remember was last week when he and Cincy had hijacked one of

Sheeny Moses' trucks. They had let that dopehead of a driver speed up and hit a bump and smash twelve cases of Scotch, and Sam Slattery had bawled them out to a fare-you-well. Benny had given him a pretty hot line of back talk on that occasion. Maybe The Works . . . .

Ah, The Works didn't call a man on the carpet over twelve cases of Scotch. He didn't call a man on the carpet at all. He had other methods of disposing of people who displeased him. No—Benny's heart leaped and his feet spurned the pavement—men whom The Works sent for rose swiftly from the ranks to sudden and giddy heights. All the same—all the same—you couldn't tell . . . .

"Moon," he told the man at the alley door of the Marietta Club, and "Moon," he told the pretty, blonde secretary in the outer office a moment later.

She tripped away bearing the news of his arrival. Strains of jazz music and a burst of song came from beyond the closed door, where the cabaret chorus was rehearsing tonight's turn. Benny wiped his forehead and fanned himself nervously with his straw hat.

"He'll see you," said the secretary, returning. "Go right in."

Benny went in. His feet sank into the soft pile of an Oriental rug. Green leather cushions in the chairs. Mahogany panelling. Flowers on the desk in the middle of the room. A flower in The Works' lapel.

"Slattery send you?"

"Ye—yeah."

"Sit down. Smoke if you want to."

Gratefully, Benny fumbled a cigaret and a match from his pockets. It gave him something to do with his hands.

"Slattery says you're a good man on a job. Know how to keep your mouth shut."

Benny gulped.

"Yeah."

"Hm! Well, I guess his recommendation's all right. Like to do a job for me?"

"I—I guess so. Uh-huh."

"All right. Know anything about the new viaduct out Ashler Avenue?"

"I've heard about it," Benny told him cautiously, wondering where this could be leading.

"You know it's a big job then. All right. There's a man from the city engineer's office trying to mess us up on it. He's been out to inspect it for the city and he's all set to make us a lot of trouble."

"Yeah?"

"He goes before the Board of Aldermen with his report day after tomorrow at four o'clock—unless——"

He paused significantly and eyed Benny, who wet his lips and nodded.

"Now if he was to make an official report to the Board," The Works went on smoothly, "it would be bound to get into the newspapers, and that would be too bad. We can't afford to make a bad impression just now with an election coming on. By the way, this man's name is Wynne—Lawrence Halsey Wynne. Know him?"

Benny shook his head.

"Well, it doesn't matter. You know Johnny Drucci?"

"Yeah. I know him."

"Good. Day after tomorrow then, at a little before four, this Wynne'll come out of the city engineer's office—that's on the east side of the Municipal Building, you remember—and come up through the arcade. Drucci'll be with him. Just in front of the arcade, Drucci'll stop and shake hands with him, and then he'll leave him and go east."

Benny smiled.

"And this Wynne'll go west," he suggested, with his heart in his teeth at the idea that he was actually joking in the presence of The Works.

But the latter unbent so far as to smile grimly himself.

"Wynne'll go west," he agreed and looked at Benny, so it seemed to Benny at least—with a certain amount of cold approbation.

"Better go down first and look over the ground," he added. He counted a sheaf of bills out of a drawer of the desk. "Two hundred—expense money. Understand everything now?"

Benny nodded, folded the bills without counting them, thrust them into his hip pocket, and got up to go.

"You can take it on the lam for Cardoza's over in Drysdale after," the other suggested. "Stay there till you're sent for. And of course," silkily, "if any of this was to get out, or if this Wynne was to get past the arcade and go make his report, why that might be pretty bad—for you. You understand?"

"Don't worry. Leave it to me."

"I am leaving it to you, absolutely. Drucci don't even know what it's all about, although he might guess. That's why I'm telling you that it won't do to have any slip-up. On your account."

"Ah, don't worry."

"I'm not; just telling you. And after . . . Well, maybe if everything goes off all right there might be a pretty good job around here for a boy that knew how to take care of himself in a jam and keep his mouth shut. Well, good luck to you."

They were the same stairs that Benny had climbed twenty minutes earlier, but now, going down, they seemed to be carpeted with springs. The very sidewalk felt buoyant under his feet. Benny Moon had received the accolade.

BUT there was work to be done first. He swung onto the back of a passing street car and rode down to within a block of the Municipal Building. Benny knew every inch of that ground, but there was nothing like being sure.

He walked up the block until he came opposite the arcade. There he stood for a moment, his eyes a little narrowed, watching the people come out. Presently he sauntered across, looked into a shop window, and after a little came back again. If anyone had happened to notice, it would have seemed the most casual performance in the world. Actually he was counting his paces, carefully, each way—checking off the distance against his estimate of it. On his return to the farther side he permitted himself a little smile of satisfaction. Duck soup at that range.

There were other details to be worked out. The car to be parked just here—he knew the car he wanted and the driver, and hadn't he two yards in his pocket for expenses? The route to be taken for the getaway, avoiding streets with traffic lights. Better have an extra car, maybe. One to hold the parking space until a few minutes before four, just so he could be sure to get it when he wanted it. A taxi would do for that, and he knew the taxi . . . Everything made to order, even to putting his man on a spot for him. All he had to do was to knock him off it. Well, nothing to do now but wait for day after tomorrow.

It was after six when he left the Municipal Building. He walked across town, went to one of the best hotels, and blew himself to a good dinner. No need to watch the price column tonight, with his hip pocket bulging with bills. Afterwards, he lit a cigaret and lounged into Slattery's, where he accepted the deference paid his new importance with outward nonchalance and inward jubilation. It wasn't everybody who was sent for by The Works. Nobody mentioned it, of course, or manifested any curiosity about it, but in the past two or three hours his status had changed completely and they showed by their manner that they knew it.

It was a temptation to celebrate just a little, but he held off. After it was all over would be time enough for that; now he was taking no chances.

In spite of having gone to bed early, Benny slept late the next morning, and woke with a queer feeling of a let-down. The exuberence of last night seemed to have fallen away from him somehow, and in its place had come a dull restlessness. Twenty-four hours—better than twenty-four hours to wait. Gees!

During the morning he wandered down to the Municipal Building again, just to make sure.

Standing in front of the arcade, he went over the whole thing again in his mind. Some way, this morning it didn't look so good. Suppose, for instance, when this Wynne came out somebody should happen to pass in front of him and mask him. Suppose his car got blocked on the getaway . . . .

He shrugged his shoulders. No use supposing stuff like that.

All the same, things did happen—luck——

It came over him with a surge of something that was almost panic that he had been standing on this one spot, staring at the arcade entrance for the past ten minutes, and that somebody would be certain to have noticed him. Gees, what a kid's trick! He turned and walked away rapidly.

He had gone nearly four blocks before he got hold of himself again. That stuff about anybody having noticed him was hooey, of course. Still, it was a kid's trick, hanging around the spot. He ought to have known better than that. No use getting excited about an open and shut thing like this—a set-up. He'd done plenty of harder jobs than this. All the same, he wished he could have done it yesterday—last night, when he was all keyed up and his heart was big, instead of having to wait till tomorrow.

Hard work—waiting.

Well, he'd have to kill this afternoon somehow. He considered, rubbing his knuckles thoughtfully along his lips. Go out to Starland Park, maybe. Get a swim. Find some girl he knew at Staymacher's and have somebody to talk to.

Better eat first, though. He didn't want to eat. Didn't feel hungry, but he forced himself to get through a plate of sliced tomatoes and a cup of coffee and a slab of raisin pie in a dairy lunch. No use wasting money on an expensive restaurant when he wasn't hungry, anyway. Tonight he'd get another good dinner. He'd feel better after he'd had a swim or something.

An hour later he stood inside the turnstile at Starland Park.

He considered. Too early for a swim yet, he decided. The crowd wouldn't begin to come out for an hour yet, and it was no fun swimming unless there was a crowd. Maybe if he waited a while he'd see somebody he knew and they could go in together. That would be better. Too early for Staymacher's, too. Maybe they'd have a picture at the Dreamland that would kind of take his mind off things. He wandered over.

Jocelyn Hartley in "Cañon Love." Jocelyn Hartley!

He went in and sat down in the cool half darkness.

He watched the comedy and the news reel with bored impatience. Then the announcement of the feature flashed on the screen and he sat forward.

She was the ranch owner's daughter this time, beloved of the young cowboy, who was suspected of cattle rustling and who eventually turned out to be a member of the Secret Service on the trail of the real thieves. For an hour and a half Benny forgot everything while she moved and lived through the scenes before his eyes. Then came the final fade-out against a sunset sky with the hero and heroine in each other's arms, and the little orphan whom they had befriended and who had stuck by them through all their vicissitudes gazing up at them admiringly, and then the lights went on.

Benny choked a little, blew his nose on a lavender bordered handkerchief, and took his way up the aisle. The spell of Jocelyn Hartley was still on him as he stood in the doorway of the theater, blinking a little in the brilliant afternoon sunlight

Gees! If a man could meet a girl like that sometime. There must be girls like that—sweet and kind of innocent. Somewhere in the back of Benny Moon's mind there was a vague picture of a white cottage with vines over it and kids playing around the door. He saw them five years old or so, one dark like himself and one fair, a girl with light hair and bare arms, checked gingham dress . . . .

Across the way the roller-coaster clanked and thundered. A merry-go-round hooted out a tired tune. Brass throated barkers yelled and clamored. There was an endless click and shuffle of heels on pavement and the air was redolent of peanuts and sizzling red-hots. Benny frowned, shrugged his shoulders, and came out of it slowly, back to the world of every day.

Fat chance he had of ever meeting a girl like that! Might as well go get his swim and go back to town. No fun swimming alone, though, no fun doing anything alone. Go down to Staymacher's and dance?

His lips tightened in disgust. He was in no mood for Staymacher's—bunch of hip swinging, gold digging broads. Have to do something, though. Couldn't stand here all day.

Oh well, might as well forget it and go over to Slim Jackson's. Slim would be somebody to talk to anyway, and he might as well make sure his hand was in for tomorrow. Gees, tomorrow!

He lounged across Sea Foam Avenue, threading his way between the slow moving cars with an effortless grace, his eyes distant, a little sullen and a little lonely. It struck him as tough that a man like himself, the man The Works trusted for a special job, two hundred dollars in his pockets, shouldn't have anybody but Slim Jackson to talk to. Well, Slim was somebody anyhow.

Slim leaned on his counter, coatless, straw hat on the back of his head, picking his teeth with a match. He nodded and threw it away as Benny came up.

" 'Lo, Benny."

" 'Lo, Slim. Howsa racket?"

Slim surveyed the deserted counter of his shooting gallery without enthusiasm.

"Not so good."

"Well, prob'ly pick up later," Benny comforted him.

He picked up a small caliber pistol laid out along with the rifles. At the other end of the gallery five little balls danced on five jets of water. He flicked the pistol up carelessly, hit four with his first four shots, missed with his fifth, and got the last one with his sixth.

"Shootin'!" remarked Slim approvingly.

"Not so bad. Load 'em up again, willya?"

Might as well try again. He liked to make a perfect score. Be sure his hand was in—before he went on a job. Gees, it was dead out here! If there was only somebody to *talk* to.

Slim handed back the pistol. This time Benny scored with his first three. His fourth went wild owing to a sudden attack on his legs from behind.

"Say——"

He turned with a snarl that changed slowly to a shamefaced grin. A diminutive bit of humanity with a round baby face stared up at him.

"Hey fella, what's the idea?" Benny protested.

SLIM leaned over the counter and looked down. The "fella" in question looked up at them with round blue eyes and a smile from which two round teeth were missing, nor did his small hands relax their grip on the slack of Benny's immaculate trousers.

"What's your name?" he demanded without shyness.

"My name? Benny's my name. What's yours?"

For an instant the small face was thoughtful, as though coming to a decision. Then:

"It's Red Mike," he announced.

Benny grinned.

"Red Mike," he repeated. "Say, that's a pretty snappy name if you ask me. Well say, Red Mike, how's if you leggo my pants before you pull all the crease out of 'em, huh?"

Slim Jackson had been looking up and down the street anxiously. Now he leaned over the counter and addressed the newcomer, who still clung to Benny's trousers.

"Say listen, kid, where's your folks?"

"I don't know," Red Mike threw the information out as of no possible consequence. "I want to come up there."

"You don't know? Say, are you lost?"

"Oh no," was the cheerful response. "Daddy and Betty's lost. I'm right here." He turned back to Benny and held out his arms. "Lift me up. I want to see—if you please," he added as an afterthought.

Benny complied. It was something new in his experience, the feel of that soft, chunky weight between his hands. He sat him on the counter, round, brown bare legs sticking straight out in front.

"There, fella. I guess you can see anything there is to see now."

Red Mike stared at the far end of the gallery.

"Why do those little balls keep jiggling up and down?" he demanded.

"Water makes 'em."

"Why don't they fall off?"

"Why—uh—" Benny looked hopefully at Slim. Slim looked at the balls as though he were seeing them for the first time, wrinkled his forehead, and then shook his head.

"Search me. They don't. That's all I know."

Round questioning eyes remained fixed on Benny.

"Why, you see, it's this way," he met the ordeal. "It's force of gravity or something."

"What's forsagravity?"

"Why, force of gravity—why it's—say, listen. Want to see me knock those balls offa there? Watch now!"

Five balls in five shots.

"How's 'at?" Benny wanted to know.

Red Mike was unimpressed.

"Once I shot a man," he vaunted, "and he went dead and blood came out of him. All out of his eyes and out of his ears and out of his nose and out of his stummick——"

"Say," Benny interrupted. "I'll bet I know who you are. You're Red Mike the Boy Avenger."

The youngster considered. He shook his head.

"No, Red Mike the Terror of the Plains," he corrected. "And once I shot a policeman and, and then another policeman came and I shot him and——"

Slim Jackson interrupted the recital. "Say listen, kid, don't you know your folks'll be about crazy lookin' for you?"

"Yes, I guess so . . . And then another policeman came and I shot him and—and —then a burglar came and—and—why then I chopped off his head."

"And then what?" Benny wanted to know. He had shot a policeman himself not longer than eight months ago, but he had never chopped the head off a burglar.

"Why then," said Red Mike, "was bedtime, so I had to go to bed. How old are you?"

"Twenty. How old are you?"

"I'm five years old and this is my birthday."

"Your birthday! And they brought you out here and then went and got lost on you? That's no way to do."

"I'm going to have a birthday cake with six candles on it. One is to grow on. I'm going to have it for my supper. Will you come?"

"Maybe." Benny grinned. "But it looks like you'd have to find daddy and Betty first."

"Looka here," Slim wanted to know, "what's your dad's name?"

"The same as mine. It's Lawrence."

"Well where do you live?"

Red Mike waved a vague fat arm.

"Over there. In a white house."

"I guess you better turn him over to the Park Police, huh?" said Slim. "His folks'll call at the station pretty quick if they haven't already."

"Ah, let him stick around a while. They might show up." Benny touched the soft hollow at the back of Red Mike's neck with an experimental finger. It was incredibly soft.

Slim shook his head.

"Crowd'll start to come in pretty quick. I ain't got time to fool with him, and a shootin' racket ain't so safe for a kid either. Take him on down."

Benny considered, frowning. He didn't particularly care for the police at any time, and somehow the round chubbiness and the gap-toothed, friendly grin of the Terror of the Plains were beginning to do queer things to him. They made him think of that shadowy cottage with the vines, made him think of all kinds of things.

"Nuh," he decided. "Sittin' in the coop with your face to the wall ain't any way to spend your birthday. Tell you what. Him and me'll float around a while and maybe we'll run onto his folks. If we don't we can go down to the station later."

He turned to Red Mike who was still enthralled by the balls on the jet of water.

"Say, fella, how's if we go get us a ice cream cone?" he suggested.

Red Mike wriggled enthusiastic assent and held out his arms. Benny lifted him down with a long swing and they set off.

Quite as a matter of course, Red Mike slipped a small, hot hand into his as they started. Benny glanced around him swiftly to see if they were observed by anyone he knew. But it felt kind of nice all the same.

Red Mike progressed something after the manner of a puppy on a leash, with sudden stops and starts. Once or twice Benny looked down and gave the small fingers a little squeeze, and when he did that Red Mike looked up at him and grinned happily.

"Do you like strawberry or chocklit best?" he wanted to know.

They discussed flavors gravely and finally bought two strawberry cones and a bag of peanuts and a furry monkey that jumped when you punched a rubber bulb.

"Do you guess the *Leviathan* will ever catch fire?" questioned the Terror of the Plains when the possibilities of the monkey had been investigated.

Benny considered.

"Well, fella, that's kind of hard to dope out. It might, or then again it mightn't."

"But which do you *think?*"

"Well, I guess it—might."

"Why?"

"Looka there," Benny said. "There's the roller-coaster. How's if we give it a try?"

"Uh!" agreed Red Mike, who had crammed all that was left of the cone into his mouth at once, and held out sticky hands.

Benny wiped them carefully on the lavender bordered handkerchief. He was becoming shameless by this time.

During the ride Red Mike clung to his pocket in a delighted panic. Benny, who made of it an excuse to throw an arm around the small body, marveled at the fun he was having. There seemed to be possibilities of pleasure in a roller-coaster that he had never imagined before.

"Don't it give you funny feelings in your stummick?" Red Mike demanded as they disembarked.

"Listen," said Benny. "How's if we start at this end, huh? And go down the line. That way we won't miss anything."

They did. They missed nothing from the Whip, where Red Mike bumped his head and the lavender bordered handkerchief was called into play again to wipe away brief tears, to the merry-go-round, where he rode on a tiger and got the brass ring twice in succession. Between excitements they gravely discussed such matters as the relative aerial speeds of Lindbergh and Santa Claus, the probable outcome of a fistic battle between George Washington and Christopher Columbus and whether President Coolidge could lick the winner, which Benny, as a Democrat, was inclined to doubt, and questions of like import.

Once or twice Benny, remembering their search, would interrupt to say:

"You don't want to forget to keep an eye out for your folks, fella. Don't want to miss that birthday cake, you know."

But most of the time he forgot it altogether. Occasionally the thought of tomorrow came to him, but when it did he put it by. It was amazingly easy to do that now. It didn't fit with Red Mike somehow. Meantime, it seemed to him, he was getting a kick out of the afternoon such as he had never dreamed it could hold.

But the best afternoons have to end sometime. They were at the top of the ferris wheel when Red Mike interrupted an exhaustive inquiry into what made it go, to lean over the side of the car and remark,

"There's daddy and Betty now. Don't they look little, way down there?"

Benny craned over the edge. A sudden panic took hold of him as he identified a worried looking man and woman in the crowd below, in whose upturned faces surprise mingled with relief.

Red Mike returned their wave calmly. "I found 'em," he said. "Now'll we'll go home and eat my birthday cake."

THE car swung lower. The man and woman hurried through the crowd. Benny ran his finger around the inside of his collar and took off his hat. Gees! What if they blamed him? They might take him for a kidnaper. They might— Gees, he ought to have taken the kid on down to the station like Slim said.

By the time their car stopped he would have slipped away into the crowd but Red Mike clung desperately to his thumb.

"Here's Benny!" he proclaimed at the top of his lungs. "He's twenty years old. I want him to come to my birthday cake."

There was no dodging it now. They'd sure think there was something funny if he tried to duck away after that. But he needn't have worried about being blamed. Instead, the man shook hands and insisted on thanking him, while the woman went down on her knees on the platform, half laughing and half crying and gathered Red Mike into her arms.

He submitted for a moment and then wriggled free, impatiently to reiterate his point.

"He's coming to my birthday cake. He said he was."

Benny flushed uncomfortably.

"Ah say, fella—"

But the other man laughed. He was keen faced with pleasant, friendly eyes.

"Why not—if you haven't anything better to do, that is, and don't mind this informal kind of an introduction."

He glanced at his wife, who smiled at Benny.

"Yes, please do," she seconded. "You've been so kind to my little boy, Mr. . . ."

"Moon," Benny supplied. "Say, it's mighty nice of you, but I wouldn't want to butt in."

"You wouldn't be," the man assured him. "Wynne is my name. We'd be glad to— what's the matter?"

"Wynne? . . . *Wynne!* Say, I—say, ain't your name Lawrence?"

"Why yes, Lawrence Wynne. But—oh, I see. The boy told you of course, and you thought it was a surname."

Benny was conscious that he was staring at him, that the man was looking at him curiously.

"Say listen, you don't work in the city engineer's office do you?"

"Why, yes," Wynne answered, puzzled. "But the youngster couldn't have told you that. Look here, I don't know you, do I?"

"Nun-no." Benny felt a queer, almost uncontrollable desire to laugh, and yet he had never felt less like laughing in his life. "No, you don't know me. You don't know me at all. I've just heard about you." He wet his lips. "Heard about you, that's all." He took off his hat and wiped his forehead. He knew they were both looking at him, knew he must sound crazy—look crazy.

"About comin' with you," he said hastily, "I've got a date. Date for seven o'clock, see. So—well you see how it is."

A look passed between husband and wife. Wynne turned back to Benny.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but of course, some other time then."

"Sure." That insane impulse to laugh almost overwhelmed him. "Sure, some other time. Got a date tonight, see."

Red Mike, who had just taken it in, flung himself at Benny's knees.

"But you said you would. You said you'd come to my birthday."

"Ah say, fella!"

"But you said——"

Mrs. Wynne laid a hand on the small shoulder.

"Some other day, sonny boy. Mr. Moon's busy this afternoon." She made an ineffectual effort to drag him away. He clung tight.

On a sudden impulse Benny picked him up in his arms, held him close for a moment, and in that moment Red Mike put his arms around his neck and gave him a soft, moist kiss.

Half an hour later, standing on the back platform of a trolley car, Benny's fingers touched the spot on his cheek where Red Mike's mouth had rested.

"Gees!" he said softly, wonderingly. "Gees!" he repeated, and then, with conviction, "That's torn it. That's certainly torn it.'

ONE o'clock in the afternoon. Benny lay on his bed, flat on his back, hands behind his head, thinking. Occasionally he moved one hand and its fingers explored his cheek curiously. He had been thinking almost without a break since yesterday, and his thoughts ran always in the same old circle that brought him back to the same point again.

Suppose he didn't do it. Then somebody else would.

Two o'clock. He might have hopped a train out of town and been five hundred miles away by now. What of it? The Works would have known about it long ago and turned the job over to somebody else. When The Works decided to have a guy stopped he was stopped.

Half past two. How's if he went to Wynne and spilled the whole thing? Yeah, and what would that get anybody? Wynne might get away with it for today, but not much longer. Not with that kind of stuff about the new viaduct inside him. And as for himself—twenty-four hours maybe, if he was lucky. Probably not so long. And it wouldn't help Wynne . . . Gees, if he only hadn't gone to Starland Park yesterday! Mechanically his fingers brushed his cheek again.

Well, if he didn't get Wynne somebody else would.

He sighed unhappily, got up, put on his coat, and went downstairs.

Back at the prescription counter in Doc Salvatore's drug store he rested his hand negligently beside the scales, with his first and little fingers extended and the other two closed on a dollar bill. Presently he exchanged the bill for a little packet of white powder. He never used the stuff except on a job, but it was good to have a little humming in his brain then.

He was still thinking when he climbed back up the two flights to his room. He was still thinking when he came out again half an hour later, but he was not thinking quite the same thoughts. Or perhaps they were the same thoughts colored a little differently. A keen observer might have noticed an unusual snap to his step and a queer, cold brightness in his eyes.

A very keen observer might also have noticed a slight bulge under his left arm. These were working hours.

Working hours, working clothes, a working frame of mind, cold as blue steel, quick and delicately balanced as a hair trigger. Benny Moon was going out on a job.

At the corner he glanced at his watch, a delicate and accurate thing, hardly thicker than two silver dollars, which he had coveted for days in the window of an uptown jeweler's and acquired at night with the assistance of an oxy-acetylene torch. Ten minutes past three—just about time.

He quickened his pace and walked rapidly four blocks west. Just about time. If he could keep his nerve up and his heart big. For once in his life, Benny Moon was going unasked into the presence of The Works and for once in *his* life The Works was going to have an argument put up to him. It was a slim chance that he would listen, but it was a chance. The Works! Gees!

This time the doorman at the Marietta Club recognized him, but he was disposed to be contrary.

"The Works want to see you?" he demanded.

"He will when he hears what I got to tell him. Out o' my way now, fella."

The white powder was buzzing in his head. He brushed past the doorman as though he hadn't been there. All the same, going up those stairs his knees felt weak and his heart pounded.

"Did you have an appointment with Mister Flemming?" the pretty, blonde secretary wanted to know.

"He'll see me," Benny told her. "Tell him something's come up about what we talked about day before yes'day, sister."

"He'll see you," she told him a moment later.

Almost, Benny weakened taking those ten or fifteen steps to the door. It was perhaps the bravest thing he had ever done in his life, and he had a reputation for nerve in circles where such things are not easily come by. But he went in.

Fresh flowers on the desk. A fresh flower in The Works' lapel. Somehow that flower fascinated and terrified him even more than the cold eyes above it.

"Well?"

Benny held his hat in his hand. He revolved the brim between his fingers, jerkily.

"Say—" He cleared his throat. "Say—this fella Wynne. This job's liable to make a lot of stink, ain't it?"

"What's that to you? You'll be taken care of."

"Well, I just thought—how's if I could talk to him some? I been lookin' him over, and it looks like I might be able to scare him out, make him keep his mouth shut. Save us a lot of trouble, huh?" That was pretty feeble, he knew, but he had to say something.

The Works' eyes narrowed just a trifle. "Huh! Turned yellow, have you?"

"Nuh—it ain't that." Benny looked at the floor. "I just thought——"

"Well, don't. I picked you because Slattery said you could keep your head shut and do what you're told. Now, you show yellow or let me down any way at all and . . . ."

The pause was ominous.

"Oh, all right, all right. Just tryin' to save you trouble, that's all."

"You needn't. I know how I want this thing handled. Understand?"

"Ah——"

The thin lips clamped themselves around the stem of the straight pipe The Works always smoked. Apparently, for some reason which he neither knew nor cared about, the man he had picked for a job didn't want to do it. If he could have known that he would have picked someone else, of course. But since the choice had been made there was nothing to do but go through with it. Organization discipline demanded that.

"Now listen here," he said. "I'm going to tell you exactly what I want so there won't be any mistake. This Wynne has inspected the viaduct job for the City and he claims there's too much sand and not enough cement in the mix. You know what kind of a stink a story like that'll raise if it gets out. There it sits. It's up to you."

Benny was silent, staring at the floor.

"And naturally," The Works went on silkily, "now that you're on the inside and know what it's all about, why that leaves it up to you to prove you're a friend of ours. You see?"

Benny saw. He had no illusions as to what was meant by that. A man who held off—didn't mix into the job and get himself as deep in as anybody—wouldn't go around very long knowing a thing like that. One thing The Works wouldn't stand for was men who knew too much. Nevertheless, he made one last attempt.

"Ah, looka here, I bet I could square him. What's the use to knock him off?"

The Works bent heavy brows on him.

"Who said anything about knocking him off?" he asked coldly, and Benny knew that he had made a mistake. Not in The Works' meaning, but in thus baldly stating it. It was the height of bad form to imply that the Works had suggested murdering anybody.

"What I mean," he amended hastily, "if you'll just leave it to me——"

"I am leaving it to you, absolutely, understand. You and me are the only ones who know anything about it; and that's just one too many unless you can do what you're told and do it right. You get me?"

He looked at Benny keenly. He knew the signs of cocaine and the uncertainty of its effects, and he added in a more agreeable tone:

"I've got my reasons. Now you keep your nerve up and go do your stuff, and afterwards we'll have something to talk over. Understand?"

Benny was still staring at the floor. Inside him there was a humming, a buzzing like a million bees. His fingers tingled and there was a queer, tense feeling in his jaws and teeth. He looked up with a curious, twitching little smile.

"Well," he said softly, "you asked for it."

There was one swift motion of his right hand to his left armpit and out again. As The Works half rose out of his chair he fired twice—once just below the flower in his button hole and again to make sure.

The Works collapsed across the desk. Benny stepped to the door and opened it.

"Quiet!" he cautioned the half a dozen startled individuals in the outer office. "Perfectly quiet!" he repeated softly.

"Sorry, sister," he apologized to the blonde secretary, who stared at him with wide, horror-stricken eyes.

He gathered the wires of the miniature telephone switchboard together with one hand and ripped them loose with a quick tug.

"Quiet! Per-fect-lee quiet!"

He backed out of the door, slammed it, and locked it from the outside. A moment later he walked briskly out into the street.

"WHERE'D he get 'em?" Wynne balanced two empty pistol shells on his palm and looked inquiringly at his wife.

She smiled.

"It seems he's made another conquest. That young man who found him at the park yesterday came by this afternoon and gave them to him. I didn't know whether they were safe for him to play with so I told him I'd ask you."

Wynne put the shells back on the pillow beside the small tousled head.

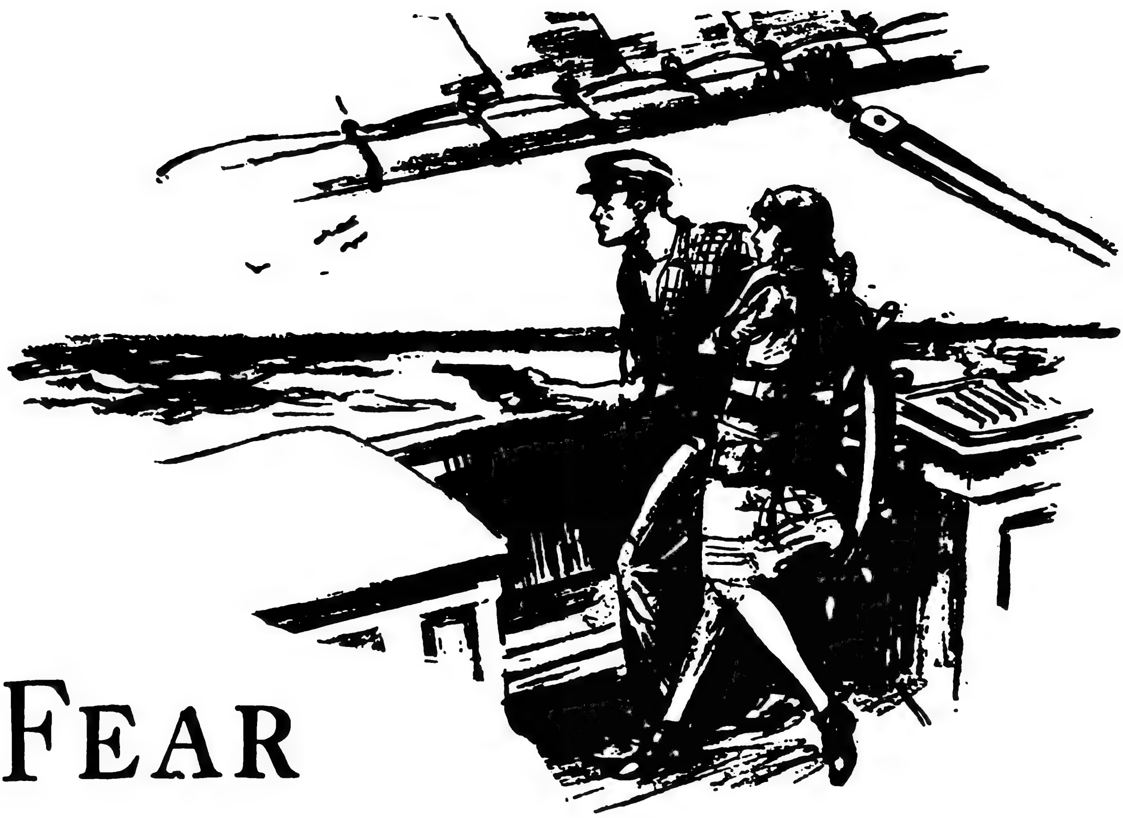
"Oh, they're perfectly safe. Isn't it funny, the things that'll please a youngster? Did you see him—the man?"

"No. Lawrence was playing down by the gate. He stopped and talked to him for a few minutes and gave him these. He said he was going away, and I suppose this was a parting gift."

Red Mike stirred in his sleep and flung up an arm. The two tiptoed out.

"You know," Mrs. Wynne said thoughtfully, "I'm just as glad. He struck me as being an awfully peculiar young man. I don't believe I'd want him seeing Lawrence too much."

A splendid, thrilling yarn by Barry Lyndon called "Greased Brakes" will introduce us to a new setting next month—the dangerous, dirt paved speedways of the Continental auto racers.



FEAR

A Tale of the Islands Trade

By R. W. ALEXANDER

HE LEANED against the bollard in the full glare of the sunshine, a big, bronzed man, face shadowed by a battered Panama, feet wide planted, thumbs hooked in the belt about his hips. Even so, there was steel in him, in the cool glance of his gray eyes, in the muscular litheness of his body. And his attitude bespoke an easy vigilance, a vigilance that had grown to be a second nature with him, unconquerable either by laziness or by the knowledge that he was safe. His face was weather-beaten and hard, his mouth grim—the mouth of a man who seldom smiled. Yet somehow the whole face was pleasant, with the pleasantness of strength.

John Stark was hard. Life had made him so, and he offered no apologies to such as chose to criticize either his character or his actions. These were few, for he had a short way with any who crossed his path, and no patience with fools.

He had enemies. Men envied him because, though luck broke against him constantly, by hard work and unshaken courage he had succeeded. But he had no pleasure in success. He fought too hard to hold it. And he was a little tired of fighting. Life had been one long, bitter struggle against luck and environment and the temptation to accept things as they came, instead of taking and moulding them to his own desires. Yet always his courage had held, and now he was his own master. The schooner at the wharf was his, the cargo in her hold was his. He could snap his fingers at any man. And still the luck broke against him.

He awaited, now, the arrival of a consignment for Melbourne, promised him by a friendly trader. It was a small consignment, but, successfully delivered, it might lead to better things. Traders, Stark knew, were chary of trusting their goods to him, because of his reputation for ill luck. That forced him to carry his own cargoes, and as a consequence reduced his profits.

As he stood there, the trader named Sanderson came towards him along the wharf. Shortly, he apologized for being late.

"Fact is, Stark, I've decided against letting you have those goods."

Stark nodded. He was not surprised. "Why?" he asked.

Sanderson made a vague gesture with his hands.

"I've been hearing things. Your crew leaving you, and—other things. I must consider business."

"Of course," said Stark. "I don't blame you, considering what you've heard."

"You know, then?"

Stark nodded.

"I know they say that what happened to the *Gloria* and the *Iroquois* is going to happen to the *Lady of Castile*. The *Gloria* and the *Iroquois* were found deserted somewhere between Hawaii and Fiji, not so much as a rope gone between the two of them. Burke, of the *Iroquois*, with a couple of his men, landed on one of the Phenix Islands. He swore the ship had been haunted, and that the rest of the crew had vanished, leaving him powerless to handle her. He had his log to prove how the men had gone overboard one by one. The man was half crazy, and nobody believed him.

"It was the same with the *Gloria*, though her skipper was never seen again, nor any of her crew. And now they say it's going to be the same with the *Lady of Castile*. I've heard it, and the men have heard it. That's why they've left, with the exception of Bendigo and Kane. And that's why you've decided against me this consignment."

"It is. I can't deny it, even if I wanted to. Things happen at sea that can't be accounted for."

"This can," Stark said grimly. "One fact seems to have escaped public notice. Both the *Iroquois* and the *Gloria* were found by French Pete."

Sanderson swore.

"A coincidence, man! That's his trade, between Hawaii and Fiji. You're not suggesting he's a pirate?"

"I suggest nothing," said Stark. "But it looks queer to me."

"And what about Burke's log?"

Stark tapped the stem of his pipe against strong white teeth.

"That seems straight enough, I admit. But there's some crooked explanation. Don't forget it. Burke was frightened nearly crazy. I've sailed the Pacific for twenty years now, and I've yet to see a ghost. Or to know the crew of a ship vanish for any other cause than women and rum."

"Burke made nothing of it," Sanderson suggested. "He's a broken man."

A leaping flame was born in Stark's gray eyes.

"Am I to be the same? By God, no! Either I bring the old hooker safe to port, or she goes down with all hands. Tell that to any of the mongers who talk about my luck."

"I know, I know," the other said soothingly. "But this is business. I can't take risks."

"I don't ask you to," Stark said with some contempt. "You know how I've lived, how luck has been against me all through. It's been a struggle for so long as I remember. And I'm tired of it. If I lose the *Lady of Castile*, I'm done. Every cent I have is in her and her cargo. She's the only reward I have for the hell I went through years ago. She's just beginning to pay, to give me back a little of what I put into her. If you give me this consignment, and I deliver it safely, other traders will give me more. I run faster passages than most skippers, and charge lower freights. There's no reason why I shouldn't have full holds every voyage—no reason except the cursed luck is always against me. Let me have these goods, and I'll insure them to their full value, if you haven't confidence enough in me to risk them otherwise."

Sanderson hesitated.

"That would cut away your profits."

"Profits? To hell with the profits, if I can break the luck!"

"You've no crew."

"They'll turn up. Men will take a risk sooner than die of hunger."

Sanderson nodded.

"I'll have the bales along in an hour. Good luck."

Stark resumed his deceptively lazy stance against the bollard. A crew would turn up. He knew that he had only to wait.

A crew turned up. They came singly and in couples, and he engaged them as they came. Some were men he would never have taken under other circumstances; but now he had no choice. All San Francisco knew his plight, and such men as wanted a berth had already applied. No more would come.

NEXT day the *Lady of Castile* sailed. She slid away from the wharf; long ripples, born of her movement, stole across the placid water. Gulls rose and circled about the mast-heads, wailing. A little group of idlers collected on the wharf. Men clambered into the rigging, grew tiny against the sanguine sky; the sails came out like clouds. The sun dropped down and down until the west was a pool of blood. The men up there were like the figures of saints on a red cathedral window. . . .

The *Lady of Castile* was two days out when Bendigo came aft, dragging by the arm a ragged boy.

"Stowaway, sir," he said laconically.

Stark, easily swaying on wide planted feet, examined the captive with interest and some suspicion. He was a slight youth, very grimy, very ragged, with a cap several sizes too large pulled down over his eyes.

"Look up!" Stark said sharply.

Hesitantly, the boy obeyed. Stark met the frightened glance of dark blue eyes, and was vaguely disturbed.

"Why in hell did you choose this boat to hide on?" he demanded.

"I wanted to get to Melbourne, sir," said the boy unsteadily.

"Why?"

"I was living with my uncle, and he died. I have a brother in Melbourne, sir."

"Are you willing to work your passage?"

"Yes, sir."

Stark nodded.

"Fix up a bunk for him in the fo'c's'le, Bose."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Bendigo. "Come on, you!"

"Please, sir—" began the boy.

"What's wrong now?" said Stark. "Want some pay?"

"No, sir. Only I—I can't sleep in the fo'c's'le."

Stark rubbed his chin.

"You're a very aristocratic sort of stowaway. Why in hell can't you sleep fo'c's'le."

The boy began to cry.

"Hell!" Bendigo said. "It's a woman!"

Stark leaned forward, snatched off the cap. A wealth of black hair tumbled to the shoulders of the ragged coat. The helmsman burst into a roar of laughter.

"Good God!" Stark gasped. His face flushed to sudden red.

"You—you—" The words choked in his throat. He gripped her by the shoulders, felt her wince as his fingers bit in, shook her fiercely in the tempest of his rage. "You damned little fool! Don't you know who I am? Don't you know what ship this is? Don't you know the chances are we'll never reach port? God——"

He released her suddenly, so suddenly that she reeled and must have fallen had he not, with a movement swift as the strike of a rattler, caught her by the coat and held her on her feet.

"I've heard of damn fool things in my time," he said more gently, "but this beats all."

The girl moved over to the rails, and leaned against them, crying softly. The tears made ragged white furrows in the grime upon her face. She looked very young, very helpless, and Stark felt his anger turn to pity, and swore under his breath. His anger he could control; but his pity he could not.

"Don't snivel," he said roughly. "I'm sorry if I hurt you. But for God's sake don't snivel."

She straightened a little and met his glance with some faint show of pride.

"It's not because of what you did," she said steadily. "It's because I haven't had anything to eat for two days, and I'm so hungry."

"Two days?" Stark said. "Since we sailed? Then you didn't bring any grub with you?"

She shook her head, wordlessly.

Stark laughed.

"Did you expect to fast until we reached Melbourne? Or did you just start out on your great adventure without thinking of such sordid things as grub?"

"I thought of it," said the girl. "But I hadn't any money."

"Bose," Stark said curtly, "get for'ard and tell cookie to send along some broth in ten minutes, and breakfast after that."

He took the girl's arm.

"Come below."

She went with him obediently. He showed her the mate's cabin, unoccupied, untidy.

"You can have this. Wash there. And," he nodded towards her clothes, "the sooner you change those, the better. You're a woman, and you should dress like a woman." He saw her flush, and was vaguely pleased. "Why did you rig yourself out like that, anyway?"

"It made it easier to get aboard," she said.

He grunted.

"I'll send you along some needles and thread and cloth." He turned to the door, then halted, glancing back. "What's your name, by the way?"

She answered, very simply:

"Shirley Jamieson."

Stark went out, slamming the door.

HE WAS in vicious mood. He had been so since the beginning of the voyage, and before. This brought to the surface every shred of his fierce resentment against life. There was danger aboard the *Lady of Castile*. He knew it as he knew few things, felt it more keenly than he did many. It was obscure, impalpable, hidden as yet; but it was there. He felt it in his bunk at night, saw a reflection of it in the quiet watchfulness of his men. They felt it, too. He saw them furtively watching him as he strode the deck, and knew that they talked of him when his back was turned. That roused in him a blind fury he found difficult to control.

He was furious, and, in a way, careless. As he saw it, this was his last fight against the scurvy luck that had followed him for years. It was to be decisive, final. Either he won through, or he went down with the *Lady of Castile*. One of these things, he told himself, must happen.

He was resigned to it. He would fight, and fight bitterly, ruthlessly, until the last ounce of his strength was gone. After that, he cared little what happened. Victory would lend him new courage; defeat would leave him a coward.

Sometimes he thought himself too credulous towards this story that had lost him his crew. Sailors were superstitious and let their superstitions rule them. The truth held little fascination for them. A sailor himself, he knew how the life can sharpen a man's imagination. But the same story had been circulated with regard to the *Iroquois*, and her crew had quietly left her. And she had been found adrift with neither crew nor master, sails set, helm swinging free, everything shipshape as when she had left port two months before. Burke had spoken of a ghost that made his men walk overboard; but Burke was mad.

Now the appearance of this girl altered everything. Stark was no longer on his own. He fought no longer for himself, desperately careless of the outcome. She was a responsibility, and a very definite responsibility. He resented that. It tied his hands. Always she must enter into his considerations. The grand carelessness of the past two days was gone. He thought of putting back to San Francisco; but decided against it as a sign of weakness, utterly abhorrent to his rebellious nature.

All he could do, he thought, was land her at Hawaii. It was on the second and longest leg of the voyage, between Hawaii and Fiji, that the *Gloria* and the *Iroquois* had lost their crews. Burke and his two men had landed on one of the lesser Phenix Islands. The *Gloria* had been found further south, on the same line. The *Lady of Castile*, logically, should be safe as far as Hawaii. He could leave the girl there and head for Fiji with the old glorious irresponsibility, ready to go down fighting.

He saw the girl that afternoon and was surprised. She had made herself a dress of the calico he had sent her, a neat, plain garment that somehow accentuated her femininity. The grime of concealment was gone from her cheeks, leaving them pale, touched with fainest pink. She was young, Stark saw, no more than twenty or twenty-one. That seemed very young indeed to his matured thirty-two. Again he was conscious of pity, and of annoyance. The world had dealt harshly with him; but he could snap his fingers at it. With her, it was different. She had not been built to fight. She could not hit back with the fierce contempt that was his.

That *had* been his, he thought. He was changing. The long fight had worn him down. The old resiliency was gone, or almost gone; the splendid courage shaken. Defeat now meant the end. He could never rise again.

He strolled over to where the girl leaned against the rails; stood before her, thumbs hooked in his belt, big body swaying easily to the roll and lift of the schooner. She greeted him with a smile in her eyes, and he knew that she was lovely with a soft loveliness he could never frame in words.

"Feeling better?"

She nodded.

"Thanks to your kindness."

"Was I kind?"

"You know you were. The cabin and the food prove it."

He stared away across the sea.

"I couldn't let you starve, could I? And the cabin was unoccupied. I've no officer this trip."

She thought him very much a man as he stood there, his forehead creased a little in a frown, his far seeing sailor's eyes vacant in thought. There was in him something that suggested massive and unyielding strength, apart from the muscles on his arms and corded neck. It may have been his attitude, that of a man who knew no master; or it may have been his rugged face and forceful chin, the stern lines of his mouth. She sensed in him that vigilance never totally discarded, that instant readiness to act should action be demanded.

"You see," he said, still intent upon the horizon, "this ship is haunted." He made a little gesture with his hands. "Perhaps not by a ghost, as you understand ghosts; but by fear. And fear can drive men to anything. The chances are she'll never reach Melbourne with me in command, or with any of her crew aboard. That surprises you? Did you ever hear of the *Gloria?* Of the *Iroquois?"*

"A little," she said. "My uncle mentioned them."

"They were found abandoned between Hawaii and Fiji. Three men swore the *Iroquois* was haunted. The crew of the *Gloria* were never seen again. Word has gone round that the same is to happen to the *Lady of Castile*. My original crew believed it, and left. I took on these dock rats instead. The same thing happened before the *Iroquois* sailed."

His glance came down to her, piercing with a sudden suspicion that almost made her afraid.

"You, for all I know, may be one of them."

"One of whom?" she asked in a tone of strain.

"Them," he said vaguely, watching her. "Ships can't be haunted by ghosts—only by fear. And men are behind all fear. There are men behind this. Men spread the story that the *Lady of Castile* was to be haunted." The hot flush of anger stole into his face. "Things that called themselves men left her because of it. If she is deserted, men will find her and bring her into port, as salvage. The ship and the cargo will be sold to pay them, because I have no money. If you can find any evidence of a ghost in that, tell me."

"But you?" she said. "You're not afraid?"

He shook his head.

"No. But I may be, later. There's nothing to be afraid of, yet. Not until we leave Hawaii. That's why I'll land you in Hawaii. That, and because I think you might be one of them."

"But—" she said quickly.

He cut her protest short.

"I land you in Hawaii! Understand that."

Anger against his luck was riotous in him again. He wondered if he was getting jumpy, his nerves frayed to rags. He held out his hands, and saw them steady as rock. The necessity to do it made him laugh in self-contempt. Things had changed.

He ended his laughter with a muttered oath. Once he allowed himself to go like that, the end had come.

He swung round on his heel, strode forward. When returned aft, the girl had gone below.

She had dinner with him the following day. He was quiet, guarded in his speech. But he encouraged her to talk about herself. She did so with a simplicity almost childish, as if seeking his trust. She seemed eager to let him know her history. He wondered if that was because he had expressed suspicion of her.

Her parents had died in her infancy. She and her brother had lived with an uncle, a ship's carpenter with a yard on Captain's Wharf. Her brother, last year, had gone to Australia, and was doing well. He would be glad to have her with him out there.

The uncle had died suddenly, leaving only a few hundred dollars. Somehow, that vanished. The funeral took most of it. She had found herself destitute in an unfeeling world. The idea of stowing away aboard a vessel bound for Australia had come to her. She could cook and sew. . . .

"You should have chosen some other

ship besides the *Lady of Castile,*" Stark said. "Of course, you didn't know."

"I knew you were her skipper," said the girl quietly. "Uncle often pointed you out to me, and told me about you."

Stark was almost incredulous.

"And you deliberately chose the *Lady of Castile,* with your eyes open?"

She nodded, a touch of color in her cheeks.

"Because I'd never heard anything to make me afraid of you, Captain Stark."

"Perhaps not," Stark said. "I've never knowingly given any woman cause to fear me. I'll not begin now by keeping you aboard."

While he watched her, she hesitated.

"Wouldn't you let me help you?" she said slowly. "Even if I gave you only moral support——"

"No!" Stark exploded.

She said no more.

Yet he did not land her at Hawaii. She refused utterly to go ashore.

"What could I do here?" she demanded. "I have no friends, no money. Are you going to drive me ashore like that?"

"I'll give you money," Stark said. "Not much, because I haven't much; but enough to keep you going——"

"Until when?"

He turned away, swearing deep in his throat.

"Stay if you want to!"

SHE stayed. In a way, he was glad of it. He had come to welcome the smile in her deep eyes, the sound of her voice, her presence at meals. She had a splendid courage, a wonderful faith that everything would turn out well. For her, the future, unsettled though it was, held no terrors.

Stark regretted his lack of determination when, the fifth night out from Hawaii, he stumbled over something that lay in the darkness under the 'midships rail Stooping, he felt for it, and felt his hand on cloth. He knew then, instinctively, that the body of a man lay at his feet.

He struck a match, sheltered the tiny flame between his palms. The man lay face downwards, one arm doubled under him, a pool of blood about his head. Stark rolled him over, struck another match. It was the seaman Kane, knifed through the throat. His face was twisted into a mask of terror; he had died unpleasantly, in the full anticipation of death.

Stark flicked away the stump of the match, sat back on his heels, thinking. Kane had been an old and valued hand; it seemed queer that he had died first, of all the men aboard. Stark thought it more than a coincidence. There was a promise of method in it. Bendigo, the bo's'n, who had signed on last voyage, would go next. The remainder of the crew were fresh hands.

This was the work of no ghost. There was something ruthlessly human about it. It had been planned in detail, and executed swiftly and silently. There had been no shouting, no struggle. The body was still warm, the blood fluid. Stark knew he had been on deck when Kane died. Yet he had seen nothing, heard nothing.

Straightening, he went below. From a drawer in his cabin he took two long barreled revolvers, already loaded. He tried them, deftly twirling the chambers, and found them ready for action, working smoothly. One at each hand, he shoved them into his belt.

The girl was in her cabin. He knocked and entered.

"I want you to stay below tonight. Don't go on deck on any account. And lock your door."

She put one hand to her breast.

"It's begun?"

Stark nodded.

"Kane's been murdered. Lock your door and you'll be quite safe."

"And you?"

He brushed the guns in his belt.

"I'll look after myself. A .45 bullet can lay any ghost that ever walked."

He went on deck, and to the fo'c's'le. A rumble of voices came from it and thin spears of light. He listened a moment but could distinguish nothing. Flinging open the short door, he descended the companionway,

Abrupt silence greeted him. He stood a few steps' height above them, watching them with hard, merciless eyes, holding them motionless in their seats. Some peered at him from the bunks, their faces startled in the light of the swinging lamp. Only Bendigo, slowly, came to his feet.

"Anythin' the matter, Cap?"

"Kane's been murdered," Stark said.

"Throat slit. I want to see your knives. Get them, Bose."

Bendigo collected them, while Stark, one hand on the butt of a gun, kept watch. The men were sullen, but obedient. They showed no surprise, Stark noted. But then, sailors were naturally slow to show emotion of any kind.

One by one he examined the knives, searching patiently for the least trace of blood. He found none. Bendigo passed them back.

"There's talk of a ghost aboard this hooker," Stark said softly. "I've no faith in ghosts. But I've faith in these." He tapped the heavy guns. "If I find any man playing the ghost, that man'll stop lead. I'll shoot, and shoot to kill. Remember that. Either this hooker reaches port with me in charge, or she goes to the bottom with every man jack aboard. Remember that, too. She's not going to be abandoned and salvaged by French Pete."

With a last bitter glance around he stamped up the companionway, and out on deck.

He found the two men of the watch astern, chatting to the man at the wheel. He swore at them, called them fiercely to task for negligence and demanded to see their knives. One, a lumbering Swede, began to bluster.

"No man takes ma knife——"

Stark leaped at him, smashed him to the deck with a blow that skinned his hardened knuckles. The Swede came heavily to his feet, made at Stark with his knife out. Stark broke his arm with a single quick shot. That ended it.

"There'll be no mutiny aboard this ship!" Stark said between his teeth. "I've a good mind to have you in irons, broken arm and all." He held out one hand. "That knife!"

He examined it in the light of the binnacle. It was innocent of so much as a spot of blood.

"Well for you, Svenson," Stark said. "Now yours, Doyle."

That, too, was clean. Stark handed it back with a sense of bafflement. The murderer was taking no chances.

"Come below, Svenson, and I'll have a look at that arm. Doyle, get another man for'ard, and keep your eyes skinned. You'll find Kane amidships; throw a tarpaulin over him."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Doyle tonelessly.

Again that absence of surprise. Stark noted it grimly.

HE WAS on deck again in the pearly light of dawn. And, for the first time in his life the cold hand of fear took him by the throat.

The dead man had moved. The tarpaulin was flung aside, spattered with blood; a trail of blood showed the path of his wanderings along the deck. He sat, now, twenty yards nearer the stern, long legs out before him, back against the rails, chin on breast. Seeing him thus, there seemed no difference between his state and a drunken stupor. Yet he had been dead at least eight hours.

Stark roared blasphemously for Doyle.

"How in hell did Kane get like that?"

"Couldn't say, sir," said the man simply. "I didn't touch him."

"Were you on this side of the deck much?"

"No, sir. I didn't like goin' near him, sir."

"Who was on deck besides yourself?"

"Only Jolson, sir. Bendigo sent him up to keep watch with me."

"I think you're lying," Stark said fiercely. "If I had proof of it I'd wring your neck."

"I didn't touch him, sir," said the man stolidly.

Jolson told the same tale. The deck had been deserted all night. They had given the corpse as wide a berth as possible. Furious as he was, Stark could understand that. It was excusable enough.

"But, by God, I'd like to know the man who shifted Kane!"

"Maybe he shifted himself, sir," said the impassive Doyle.

Stark whirled on him.

"What in hell d'you mean by that?"

Doyle was vague.

"There's queer things happens, sir——"

"Call Bendigo," Stark said harshly. "Tell him to pipe the men on deck."

The shrill pipe of the bo's'n's whistle brought the crew tumbling from below. Stark gestured towards the man who sat there with his throat cut.

"Wrap him up in that tarpaulin, and put a couple of weights at his feet. We'll bury him now."

The schooner lay to while Stark, in an

even, toneless voice, read the prayers for the dead.

". . . Thy body to the deep . . ."

The plank was tipped, and all that was mortal of Michael Kane slid into the blue water with scarcely a splash.

Stark, heavy browed, gestured to the helmsman. The sails of the *Lady of Castile* filled; she steadied, gathered way, took up her little song of torn water.

"The first," Stark said softly. He raised his voice. "Swab the deck, there! See to it, Bose."

The girl was inquisitive at breakfast.

"I thought I heard a shot. . . ."

Stark nodded.

"Svenson went for me, and I broke his arm. It's nothing."

"And—Kane?"

"Kane's buried."

She made a little wordless sound of pity.

Stark's eyes were grim on her.

"I wonder if you're in it? It seems too much of a coincidence, your stowing away this trip. Did you stow away aboard the *Gloria* and the *Iroquois* as well?"

"If I did, would I tell you so?" She stretched a hand towards him across the table. "Captain Stark, can't you trust me a little? I'll do anything you ask to make you trust me."

He smiled suddenly, and she thought she had never seen a man so utterly transfigured.

"Just now I can't trust anyone. Not even myself." The smile was gone, its place taken by an expression of terrible bitterness. "There's a murderer aboard this ship. Or several murderers. Several, because I think Kane was held while his throat was cut. They're calculating, cold-blooded murderers. All this was planned out long before we left port. I'm not meant to be aboard when the ship reaches Melbourne, if she ever does. Nor is the crew." He leaned a little forward. "Instead, French Pete will be in command, with his men in the fo'c's'le."

"You'll let them take the ship from you?"

"I'll see them in hell first, and the ship on the bottom!"

Her cheeks were pale, her breath quick, so earnest was she.

"You're right! If I'd slaved all my life, as you have, and just succeeded, I'd *kill* to keep what I'd won."

Stark laughed mirthlessly.

"There'll be killing enough before we raise Fiji."

BUT the killing was slow to come. A day passed, and another and another, while still the *Lady of Castile* ploughed south and west towards Viti Levu. A week passed, a week of blue skies and a spanking wind abeam. Stark, never the man to lose an opportunity, saw that the schooner logged every inch she could while the wind held strong. Day after day every sail bellied taut, until the waves roared against her side in crested mountains and spindrift flung like rain across her deck. Another knot, and another and another—nearer port and safety. Nearer success. Nearer a change of luck. They sped behind her in a broadening line that stretched a little to leeward. Come what might, a wind like this must not be wasted.

Then one night Bendigo came to Stark as he paced the deck, alert, watchful eyed. This promise of peace deceived Stark for not an instant; he had been promised peace before.

"The men say they've seen a ghost, sir."

"A ghost? What sort of a ghost?"

"That I couldn't rightly say, sir. They don't seem to know themselves. But they think it's Kane's."

Stark prodded him in the chest with a stiff forefinger.

"Tell them the next man who sees a ghost has to account to me for being drunk. Tell them that, Bose."

"Aye, aye, sir," said the bo's'n unemotionally.

Stark measured him with thoughtful eyes.

"This is your second trip with me, Bendigo. I think I can trust you."

"That you can, sir," said the bearded seaman.

"Then keep your eyes and your ears open, and tell me everything you see. If I knew the men who murdered Kane, I'd call them out on deck and shoot them like the curs they are." He hammered on the rail with a clenched fist, hard almost as the wood itself. "They've jumped the wrong ship this time, by God! They'll learn it as soon as they show their hand."

"Aye, aye, sir," Bendigo said. "I'm with you all the way."

Jolson disappeared the following night. He went with a long drawn scream that left after it the utter silence of fear. He had been at the wheel. The schooner yawed widely, fell into the trough of the seas, began to plunge.

Stark leaped for the deck, gun in hand. He slept lightly these nights, and fully clothed. In the pale half light of a dying moon he saw the deck deserted, the wheel idly swinging. He straightened the ship, roared for Bendigo, half inarticulate in his anger. The two men of the watch came heavy footed from the bow, followed more briskly by the bo's'n.

"Where in hell's Jolson?"

"Gone, sir," one of the watch answered. He glanced uneasily about him. "We heard him yell, an' stayed where we were. We could do nothin'."

Stark cursed them in a voice choking with contempt and bitterness.

"You dirty scum! Call yourselves men! God . . . Take the wheel, you! Move an inch from it and I'll have you in irons. Bose, rouse the men and search for'ard. I'll take the stern."

Dawn was in the sky when Stark returned on deck. Bendigo met him.

"No word?"

"No word, sir. He ain't aboard."

"You think he's gone overboard?"

"He ain't aboard, sir," said the bo's'n again.

Stark went to the wheel, examined the deck about it. Jolson had been a big man, not easily overpowered — certainly not without a struggle. Yet sign of a struggle there was none. The deck, pumiced to a snowy whiteness, was innocent of scratches, of the tiniest drop of blood. It seemed almost as if Jolson had gone to his fate with no more than that long drawn scream as a protest.

Stark was suspicious of that. It was unnatural that a man should die by violence without showing some resistance, however futile.

"You're sure he's not stowed away somewhere for'ard, Bose?"

"I looked into everythin' bigger nor a rathole, sir," Bendigo said.

Stark grunted.

"There's nothing to be done, then. I'm going below to get some sleep."

He had dinner with the girl. He was taciturn, unwilling to talk. Speech then annoyed him. He craved action. He was in the dark, fighting an unseen enemy, an enemy that refused to come to grips.

"Don't let them rattle you," said the girl. "If once you do, they'll win. Remember they're only men."

Stark nodded slowly.

"Only men."

"Perhaps worse than most," the girl admitted. "But no more to be feared because of that. If once you could catch them at work. . . ."

STARK began to sleep by day and to prowl the deck by night. He went barefoot, padding softly in the shadows, standing motionless an hour at a time, peering through the darkness towards where the helmsman sang softly to himself. The men of the watch he avoided; it might be better if they thought him asleep in his bunk.

His vigilance went for nothing. He was stalking forward one night, when the schooner yawed and her sails slatted idly against the spars. He whirled, drawing one gun, ran aft with silent speed. The wheel was deserted. Sign of the helmsman there was none. The space about the binnacle was peopled only by shadows.

Stark lashed the wheel, went forward swiftly to the fo'c's'le. Halting there, he listened an instant, but heard nothing. Where were the men of the watch? He detected them in the bows, leaning over the rails. Queer that they hadn't noticed the schooner's lurch from her course. Queer, and suspicious.

Softly still, Stark went down into the fo'c's'le. It was dark down there, with only a gleam of gray light from above to show him where he stood. Again he listened. One snored; another muttered brokenly in his sleep; another turned over with a deep, long sigh.

Stark with one hand struck a match.

"What the hell. . . ."

One by one the men awoke, peered down at him from their bunks. He touched the match to the wick of the lamp.

"Who's at the wheel, Bose?"

Bendigo scratched his head.

"At the wheel, sir? Wills, it'll be."

"He's gone."

Bendigo nodded slowly.

"God save him!" he muttered piously.

"Doyle, take the wheel until sunup," Stark commanded.

"Me, sir?" the little man whined. "After what's happened to Wills?"

"Snap into it!" Stark said grimly. The threat in his eyes made Doyle hasten to obey.

"We'll search at dawn," Stark told Bendigo. "Meanwhile, see that nobody leaves the fo'c's'le."

"Aye, aye, sir," Bendigo said.

They searched the ship at dawn. Wills was not aboard.

In the cabin, Stark showed for an instant the storm that rent him.

"They're beating me," he groaned, his head in his hands. "I'm in the dark, and I can't do a darn thing. If only they'd come out and fight!"

"They're only men," said the girl softly. "Soon or late they'll make a mistake. You'll beat them yet."

"How can I?" Stark cried bitterly. "How can I? They're hitting at me, and I can't hit back." He gripped her by the arm, with such force that she had difficulty in stifling a cry of pain. "Are you one of them? *Are* you?"

"No! I swear it."

He laughed wildly.

"By God, if it wasn't for you I'd sink her, and let them drown like rats!" He brooded a while, eyes vacant, mouth down drawn. "Like rats," he said softly, then, and laughed. "Shoot them away from the boats."

She took him by the shoulders, shook him.

"Don't look like that! Some night you'll catch them at it, and that'll be the end."

"Yes," he said more calmly. "That'll be the end."

DOYLE went next, within three days of Wills, went while the glow of sunset lingered in the sky. Stark himself took the wheel that night, steering with a loaded gun before him on the binnacle. He saw nothing, heard nothing. But there were signs of strain about his mouth when he went down to breakfast.

"They're wearing me out," he told the girl. "One of these days my nerve will snap, and I'll run amuck." He smiled as he said it; but she knew he meant every word.

"How many men are left?" she asked.

He counted them on his fingers.

"Bendigo, Svenson, Merle, Clay, and cookie. Five. Svenson can be counted out, because of his arm. Bendigo——"

"You trust Bendigo too much."

He was startled.

"Bendigo was with me last voyage."

"That means nothing. Probably he was just learning his way around, getting you to trust him."

"Maybe. . . ."

Her eyes were blazing.

"Why not head for Apia?" She pointed to the chart on the wall. "We'll be pretty close tonight. Take the wheel yourself, and we'll be in port by morning. There are police at Apia."

"And then?"

"Have the ship properly searched, and carry out an investigation."

He shook his head.

"I'll see it through."

He was shocked to profanity when, that night, she stole to him as he stood motionless in the shadow of the 'midships deckhouse.

"What in hell are you doing up here?"

She gripped his arm, and he felt her tremble.

"I've been for'ard, listening. Right for'ard, in the bow. And I heard Jolson and Clay."

He stiffened.

"You're dreaming!"

"Am I? They're where I stowed away, in the little cubbyhole past the for'ard hole. It can be reached through the lazaret."

"By God!" Stark said softly. "I'll go root them out."

"No, no!" She clutched his arm. "They'd fight. Run for Apia."

He considered it.

"Merle's at the wheel. I could send the watch below. And you, too."

"I stay with you."

"But there may be danger."

She ignored that.

"I've more to tell you. Bendigo is French Pete."

Stark drew in a long breath.

"French Pete! How d'you know that?"

"Jolson and Doyle were laughing about it. His beard is false."

He started forward.

"I'll root them out, the thieving rats!"

"*Please!* If you go down there, I go with you!"

"But why?" he asked curiously.

"Because. . . ."

Abruptly he understood.

"I'll send the watch below, then. Wait here."

He went aft to where Clay and Svenson leaned against the rails.

"Get below. I want to know every man's in the fo'c's'le. I'll keep watch."

"Aye, aye, sir."

He followed them, saw them into the fo'c's'le, and returned to the girl.

"They'd suspect something if I sent Merle down. Better give him a tap over the head."

"Yes," she said, reluctantly.

"It's the only way," Stark excused himself. "Come aft when I whistle."

Merle, at the wheel, had no suspicions.

"A fine night," Stark said.

"It is that, sir."

Stark slid one of the heavy guns from his belt.

"Is that a light over there?"

Merle turned. Stark struck at the base of his skull, caught him as he crumpled, lowered him to the deck. A soft whistle brought the girl to his side.

"You haven't killed him?"

"No. He'll be asleep a few hours, that's all." Stark spun the wheel. "Samoa lies a few points south of east. Run down to the cabin and get me the chart you'll find on the table. I marked our position on it an hour ago."

She brought it in a instant, and in the light of the binnacle he worked out their course.

"Now don't you think you'd better go below, little lady?"

"I'll stay with you, if I may."

He found a queer tightness in his throat.

"If you would—always!"

"It's all I ask."

She stood beside him, straight and slender, while through the long night he held the schooner on her course.

DAWN showed them the island breaking the horizon. With weary eyes they watched it change and grow, take shape and color.

"Another hour," Stark said. "French Pete loses out this trip."

She glanced anxiously towards the fo'c's'le.

Stark laughed.

"I was to be scared into abandoning ship. French Pete would then take charge, and bring the hooker to some prearranged point, where they'd meet his brig. The crews would change over, and Pete would sail his prize into port."

"And Kane?"

"Kane can't have been one of the gang. They had to get him out of the way. The others just left the wheel and slipped for'ard. Simple enough."

"You think there'll be trouble when they come on deck?"

"Maybe. Will you go below?"

She smiled, and shook her head.

"I stay with you."

French Pete came on deck. He saw the green hill of the island, and swore. He vanished into the fo'c's'le.

"Trouble brewing," Stark said easily.

French Pete reappeared on deck, the missing men at his heels. They carried revolvers. Scattering, they rushed towards the wheel.

Stark caught the girl, laid her on deck behind the bulk of the unconscious Merle.

"Stay there!"

His guns came up, spouting flame and lead. French Pete pitched forward, lay face down, a bullet through his throat. Doyle screamed and collapsed sideways into the scuppers, one thigh shattered. Jolson shot steadily, lumbering forward. A bullet caught Stark in the side, splashed the crimson of his blood across the deck. He swore between clenched teeth, killed the Swede with a shot from each gun. Things were dancing strangely; the deck was heaving, heaving. . . .

He felt hands over his, small, cool hands. He heard a voice in his ear.

"They've run! Don't shoot any more. Don't let them know you're weak. Courage!"

He laughed, drooping across the wheel.

"I'm not weak. It's only a scratch. I'll bring her into port yet." With a magnificent effort he straightened, passed a hand across his eyes. "Am I on the course?"

"Yes."

"You'll keep me there."

Her voice was lilting, joyous.

"Always. Courage!"

You never read a more thrilling or unusual story than this, a tale of intensely dramatic action behind the German lines, when the issue of the Great War lay in the hands of the fabulous spy known only as——

SECRET OPERATIVE K-13

A Three Part Novel

By JOEL ROGERS

CHAPTER I

THE COUNTER ATTACK

AT FOUR o'clock of the afternoon General-Leutnant Paul Friedrich Hermann von Schmee, Freiherr von Eglesdorf, Graf von Schlossheim, commanding officer of the Seventh Corps of Von Falkenhayn's Second Field Army, was enjoying *Frühes Abendbrot mit Tee* on a terrace of the château of Oldemonde, in Hainaut southeast of Mons, when a solitary British Sopwith came diving down out of the sky.

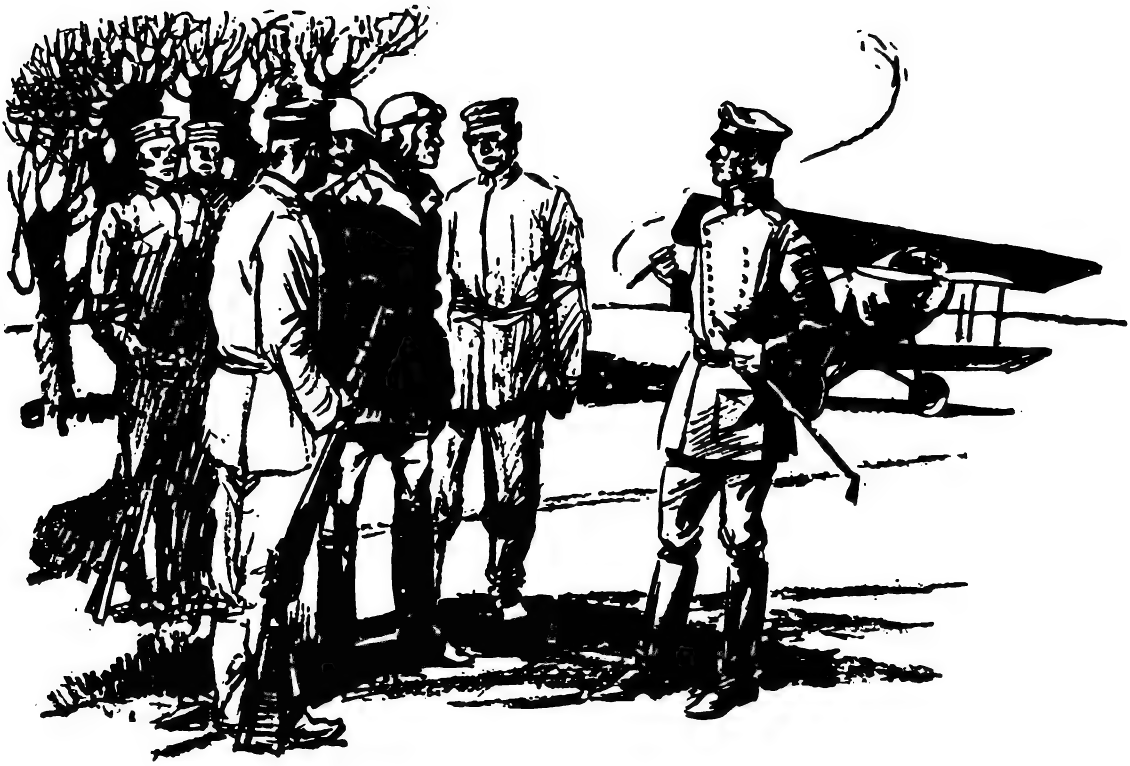
The general was an enormous black bearded Prussian with gleaming little eyes. His beard was spread out over his breast in long spikes. When he breathed heavily his abdomen jiggled and bounced on his lap like a sackful of potatoes. The name of Paul Friedrich Hermann von Schmee, with all its baronial and military embellishments, is one that has earned an imperishable luster on the roll of honor of the late German Empire. To English speaking people, however, as well as to many common people of the present German Republic, he is better remembered by his simple title of "the Butcher."

The air that day was sunless and gray. A ceiling of cloud moved at eight thousand feet. Tame spotted deer in the great quiet parks of Oldemonde stirred restlessly about. It was not the dimmed rumble of guns on the front miles to the south which troubled them, for they had long grown indifferent to that meaningless sound. It was rather a premonition of storm which made them uneasy. A thunderburst hung heavily in the July weather. Soldiers attached to von Schmee's headquarters staff sweated as they went about their work or stood motionless on guard.

Then all at once spotted deer and green-clad men began running wildly. Straight from the cloud the shadow of the flying Sopwith came diving down on Oldemonde.

Its motor was silenced. Its flying wires hummed with a deep cello note. Its propeller, turning over slowly in the rush of the wind, shimmered like a dragon fly's wing. Swift as a thunderbolt and clean as a hawk, it hurtled down toward the pleasant shaded stone terrace where the good general sat at tea.

"Name of a pig! The English!" shrieked the little Dutch lady who was having tea with him.



The willow settle on which she had been reclining toppled over behind her. She stumbled up, wrapping her arms about her head as if they would protect her somehow from that terrific thunderbolt that was diving down at two hundred miles an hour.

"The anti-aircraft, Paul!" she screamed. "The filthy pig will shoot us!"

The general reached out a big hairy hand and patted her little knee. Stolidly he swished a hunk of pumpernickel around in his teacup.

"Be galm, Alys," he said. "It is nuttings."

Since the lady knew no German, and he no Dutch, they were obliged to carry on their lovemaking in the language of the hated English. He popped the soggy hunk of pumpernickel into his mouth, wiping his fingers on his beard. He slapped his knees.

"We haf der hospital cross spread oud, my child," he said. "Do you dink any Entente blanes would contravene the rules of cifilized warfare by bombing a hospital?"

He chuckled and nodded shrewdly, rubbing his hands together. Slowly he arose. He stared up with bright little eyes.

A thousand feet overhead the diving Sopwith leveled out. It seemed for an instant to hang motionless in the sky. Then its bow swung twice to the right. Its right wing jerked down twice. It began to spiral downward.

General von Schmee nodded with quick satisfaction.

"Leutnant von Reuter," he said to a young officer standing behind him, "summon Colonel von Kleinhals, Chief of Communications. It is an operative of our Intelligence from the enemy lines. He brings information of the utmost consequence. Prepare to receive him when he makes a landing."

The young officer lowered the binoculars through which he had been watching. He was an erect, dark-haired first lieutenant of the Prussian Guards. His hand clicked to the salute.

"Zu Befehl, Excellenz!"

He was off at a run. The Dutch lady followed his swift, lithe figure with a languorous gleam in her light green eyes. Softly she waved a palm fan against her bosom.

"What a han'some young man!" she sighed. "It iss too bad he speaks no English."

General von Schmee caught her wrist in

a heavy hand. He gave it a quick twist.

"Fool!" he said. "Keep dose eyes to yourself! Too much looking around you hass caused brettier ladies dan you to be shod for spies against a wall!"

He turned his ponderous body slowly about, breathing like a whale. With squinted eyes he followed the object of the lady's adoration. He nodded slowly. And again he nodded, as if he was planning something very cruel for the handsome young lieutenant of the Prussian Guards.

Oberleutnant Ritter von Reuter ran hastily toward an open field where the Sopwith was descending.

"Find Herr Oberst von Kleinhals, Wolf!" he shouted to his shambling orderly sergeant, who had popped up out of nowhere and was trailing hard behind him. "The general's orders! It is Intelligence from the enemy!"

A straggling crowd of privates and non-commissioned officers were running along with him, yelling like dogs, in a race to be the first to reach the English ship. Von Reuter halted and heeled about sharply. He slapped his thigh with a swagger stick. There was a flash in his stormy blue eyes.

"Back to your duties!" he shouted. "Secrecy is of the utmost consequence! Let no man go a step farther!"

The Sopwith had skimmed down to a hayfield beyond a copse of cedars. It stood, with propeller turning slowly, beside a stack of new mown hay.

As Ritter von Reuter came through the cedar wood and cut across the field, Colonel von Kleinhals, Chief of Communications, came up from another direction. The colonel was a large, blond, red-bearded man. He flashed a curious sidelong glance at the young officer. He was a suspicious man, ready to jump at his own shadow, as is befitting a high officer of the *Nachrichtenamt,* the great and secret German Department of Military Intelligence.

"General's orders, Herr Oberst!" von Reuter panted. "Intelligence from the enemy——"

"I know, I know," von Kleinhals nodded.

The pilot of the English ship sat crouched in the forward cockpit. The gunner's cockpit was empty. Only the spy's helmeted head showed above the cockpit coaming. The collar of a leather coat was turned up above his nose, meeting a pair of leather rimmed, amber colored goggles like a mask. His eyes peered forth with the color and sharpness of a fox's. Except for his masked eyes, not a square inch of his face was showing, to betray if he was white or black or yellow, or even human at all.

He lifted two gloved fingers of his right hand above the cockpit coaming, pointing down. Colonel von Kleinhals nodded sharply. He seemed to know the man.

"No formalities!" he said. "I am Colonel the Count von Kleinhals, Chief of Communications of the headquarters staff of the Seventh Army Corps. This is my aide, First Lieutenant von Reuter of the Prussian Guards. And you are——"

"No names, I beg of you!"

Ritter von Reuter watched the spy curiously. But nothing could be seen. The man might have been a sack of garments, and nothing more. Oh, yes, there was just one little peculiarity that the young Prussian had noted. The little finger of the spy's right hand, when he lifted it, was bent in a hook, as if it had been broken at some time, and could not be straightened again.

Von Reuter amused himself by screwing a monocle into his eye and letting it pop out again with a sharp twist of his inquisitive eyebrow. He was a cheerful young officer, with a smile on his red cherubic cheeks. He caught the monocle deftly in the air as it fell, and looked around for an audience for his foolery. There was only his shambling orderly sergeant behind him, Wolf, gaunt and watchful as the animal for which he had been named. Sergeant Wolf had come up silently, on rubber heels.

"Ah, Wolf, you there?" said von Reuter languidly.

"Zu Befehl, Herr Leutnant!"

"Thunder weather, you are like a disease!" complained Von Reuter.

Colonel von Kleinhals had received a small packet of papers from the spy. He buttoned it carefully into an inside breast pocket and put his hand over it.

"Of the utmost importance!" the spy breathed.

The colonel nodded.

"Versteh'," he said.

The spy leaned over. Beneath the muffling coat collar his whisper was almost inaudible to Von Reuter.

"In the name of God, be careful!" he said. "I have learned without question that K-13 is operating with you!"

"So we fear," muttered von Kleinhals. *"Auf wiedersehn, Herr Oberst!"*

Nothing more. The time had been only seconds.

The spy ducked his head. He opened the throttle with a roar. The idling propeller turned over like lightning. The hurricane blast of it lashed back on von Reuter, blew him sideways, almost beat him down, as the ship shot off.

"Thunder weather. What's the hurry?" he complained.

Across the bumpy field the Sopwith raced in long kangaroo bounds, and rose up into the air. Above the parks and forests of Oldemonde, above the carp ponds and the farmed lands, high up in circles it went wheeling, climbing as it turned with a fading roar. So, it corkscrewed into the ceiling of cloud a mile and a half high and droned away unseen.

COLONEL the Count von Kleinhals looked about him with a cold, suspicious glance. Afraid of his own shadow; yes, he knew it. A little breeze wavered in his red beard, causing it to toss about like red seaweed stirring in a tide. He kept his left hand clapped over the packet in his breast pocket. His right hand had crept down to his pistol.

Three paces behind him marched his aide, Oberleutnant von Reuter. And three paces behind von Reuter there shambled, with a silent tread, Sergeant-Ordonnanz Wolf, von Reuter's orderly. They crossed the hayfield toward the cedar wood that fringed the château of Oldemonde. Down at a far end of the field three Belgian peasant women could be seen, walking abreast with swinging scythes, mowing the hay to feed the horses of the conquerors. From the cedar wood there came the slow thud of a woodsman's ax. But as the three Germans approached it, that sound ceased.

The late afternoon sky grew darker. Hot spatters of rain dropped over the grounds of Oldemonde. Suddenly Ritter von Reuter burst into laughter.

Colonel von Kleinhals stopped as if a great fifteen inch shell had exploded behind him.

"What's that?" he snapped.

"Excuse me, sir," said von Reuter.

He couldn't explain that he had laughed because, seeing himself so solemnly stalking the august colonel, and being stalked in turn so silently by Sergeant Wolf, he had been suddenly reminded of an English quatrain he had learned in school, about the little fleas that have littler fleas upon their backs to bite 'em.

"You laugh too much, Herr Leutnant," said the colonel grimly.

"Yes, sir," said von Reuter, catching his monocle hastily as it popped out of his eye.

"Proceed with all haste and give the general my compliments," said the colonel. "The expected information is at hand. Tell him I beg an immediate conference."

Saluting briskly, the young lieutenant ran at a quick pace into the cedar wood, where the sound of the unseen woodsman's chopping had ceased. He drew his pistol out as he plunged into that shadowy and rather gruesome darkness.

THREE or four minutes later von Reuter was reporting at the quarters of General von Schmee. As many more minutes had passed, however, before the sentries were given orders to admit him.

"The Herr General is busy, Herr Leutnant," explained a big blond Saxon sergeant, with a sly droop of his eye, rapping again discreetly at the door. "The Ambassador from the Low Countries is with him."

That was the name of the guardsmen for the fair Dutch lady, Vrow Alys.

Von Reuter found the general leaning over his desk, scattering papers around like a wind storm. His bearded face was knotted up with a look of rage and alarm.

"Schweinigelei und Verdammnis!" he snarled in three languages. *"Ein Tausend blue Deffils! Sacré nom d'un cochon!"*

He swept to the floor a pile of fluttering papers. Unseeingly he stared at von Reuter. His small round eyes were popping out of his head.

"Lost!" he raved. "Plans of great secrecy! I could not have misplaced them! God in Heaven! Who has been in here? This is treachery!"

In a corner, perched on a priceless oak sideboard that von Schmee had brought down from Louvain, sat Vrow Alys, languidly blowing smoke rings to the ceiling.

Von Schmee's glance darted around him. He saw the amiable gaze which the lady was casting on the handsome young lieutenant, if von Reuter in his innocence had missed it.

His black beard quivered with the clenching of his jaws. Menacingly he strode up to von Reuter, who stood like a fence post at salute.

"Where is Colonel von Kleinhals!"

"He extends his compliments, Excellency, and——"

"I need no compliments!" mouthed the general.

"He was following me immediately, sir. Information of the utmost importance is in his possession. He begs an immediate conference."

"Ach!"

Von Schmee paced up and down with a short stride. His belly sagged and swayed in front of him like the tail of a sausage balloon. He rubbed his big hairy hands together. He began to chuckle with a sound that seemed to come from deep in his entrails.

"If the news is what I think," he muttered, more to himself than to the red cheeked young lieutenant, "by August we shall be in Paris!"

He was immersed in profound reflections. Coughing gently, Von Reuter quirked a meaningful glance in the direction of Vrow Alys. The general looked up with a scowl.

"Ach, she is a fool!" he said. "She knows no German. Do not think about her."

He waddled up and down, combing his black beard meditatively with his fingers. He had recovered his good humor. He began to cast quick glances at Vrow Alys, who had curled up like a kitten on the sideboard and seemed to be asleep.

Perhaps the young lieutenant's gesture had started a train of thought in von Schmee's mind. Suddenly he strode up to her and gripped her by the shoulder.

"Oud!" he growled. "Oud der door! Enough of you is a blenty. I haf business dat does not need you."

He hauled her down and with one push sent her spinning toward the door. She swore like a cat. He stood at the door watching her, growling beneath his breath and shaking his head. He spoke a brief word to one of his aides, a brigadier general, in the anteroom.

Again he paced up and down. A gilt clock ticked on the mantelpiece, ticking the minutes away.

"Where is Kleinhals?" he snarled abruptly. "I must have those reports at once!"

"He was on his way, Excellency. I can't imagine——"

"It is not for you to imagine," said von Schmee.

He gave Ritter von Reuter an ugly look. He muttered to himself. In a minute or two more he glanced at his watch. Several times he repeated the gesture, at short intervals.

"Late! Late!" he said. "And carrying priceless information! I cannot understand it."

Then, suddenly, he seemed to understand it. The brain behind his sharp eyes was very large and sagacious. It had been working actively. The terrible truth struck him now. His puffy face above his beard went as white as his shaven skull. He reeled toward his great carved oak desk and began pushing frantically at a whole switchboard of electric signals.

"Find von Kleinhals!" he shrieked to the men who came running in. "K-13 has got us! We are betrayed!"

FROM all directions green-clad soldiers were running over the grounds of Oldemonde. Staff officers of every rank, from waxen faced under-lieutenants to grizzled major generals of divisions, came pouring in a hornet stream out of the château.

"Auswarts die Wache!" someone was bellowing. "Turn out the guard!"

Lieutenant von Reuter heard that wild voice behind him as he ran straight toward the cedar wood where he had last seen Colonel von Kleinhals and Sergeant-Ordonnanz Wolf.

"Turn out the guard! *Turn out the guard! . . ."*

The dark little copse of evergreens was heavy and still. No bird stirred in it, nor did a shadow move. Yet as von Reuter drew nearer he saw that other men had found Colonel von Kleinhals already. Two stalwart noncoms of the Guards were staggering out of the cedar wood, bearing the Chief of Communications between them. His arms clung about their shoulders. His feet dragged and bumped on the ground. There was a sick, sick look in his glazed eyes. Suddenly he slipped from their supporting shoulders, and lay like a spilled-out sack.

"Thunder weather!" gasped von Reuter, running up. "What kind of a game is this?"

"We found him this way, Herr Leutnant," babbled one of the guardsmen.

Von Reuter knelt beside his injured chief. Von Kleinhals tried to speak, but could not make it. His hand kept picking at his breast. Von Reuter saw that his coat had been slit open. The packet brought by the flying spy was missing.

One look at von Kleinhals' staring eyes, and von Reuter sprang up.

"Deploy around this wood! Let no man get away!" he hurled commands in sharp, guttural phrases. "Shoot anyone who tries to run! Locate Sergeant Wolf, who was walking with the colonel! There is an enemy among us!"

A crowd of officers was gathering thickly about the stricken man.

"Who did this, Leutnant?" roared a field officer.

"Someone who will be shot for it—if we ever find him," said von Reuter quietly.

THERE was a stain of crimson trickling down above Colonel von Kleinhals' ear that was redder than his beard. In ten minutes he stood, swaying slightly, making his report to General von Schmee.

"Beg to inform you, Excellency," he gasped, "that returning through the cedar wood I was struck down from behind by an unseen assailant. Apparently likewise Sergeant Wolf, who was just behind me. The information brought by our Intelligence has vanished without trace—*spurlos verschwunden.*"

General von Schmee sank heavily into a chair. He beat his fist on his forehead. His eyeballs seemed to sweat.

"It is a black loss," he muttered.

Lieutenant von Reuter marched in stiff-kneed, and stood at the salute.

"I have searched thoroughly, sir," he said. "No man in the wood. Only Sergeant Wolf. He was sitting hugging his knees, sir, somewhat out of his head and suffering from a blow on the skull. He can give no information."

General von Schmee sat staring at the floor like a dying man. For the moment he was conscious of nothing that was said.

"A black loss, a black, black loss!" he moaned. "It has cost us a great smashing victory, and maybe Paris."

He climbed to his feet heavily after a moment. His eyes were blazing—red and furious, like the eyes of a mad elephant. He pounded his great black-haired fist on the table, till a wine bottle jigged around in a crazy dance and crashed over the edge to the floor.

"A spy!" he mouthed. "A damned unscrupulous English spy! Here at headquarters! Sucking our heart's blood! If I had my hands on him, I'd nail him to the cross!"

Von Reuter glanced quickly out of the corners of his eyes at Colonel von Kleinhals.

"Lost, all lost!" the general raved. "Blundering stupidity! It has cost us Paris, and maybe the war! The English always beat us! They are too smart for us! Kleinhals, you will pay for this! You will be broken!"

The colonel wiped his mouth with a trembling hand.

"If the general will pardon me," he said, "our Intelligence has heretofore always been able to master the enemy's plans. We have spread our nets completely around him. We have been years ahead of him. Now his espionage is beginning to counter-attack. Regrettable, Excellency. But to be expected."

"Ja, ja!" muttered von Schmee, waggling his head. "We have fooled them long. But when they begin, they are smart. They are a very deep race, these English. Not thorough. Not scientific. But they have something, Kleinhals, that they call brains—*das Gehirn.* A counter-attack! *Ach,* if I had in my hands the spy that did this thing, I would nail him to the living cross, in defiance of the so-called laws of warfare!"

Ritter von Reuter coughed. He felt a strange desire to laugh. And that would have been awkward. The eyes of von Schmee were drilling through him.

"No trace of the spy, Herr Leutnant?" said von Schmee, staring at the young lieutenant of Guards as if he were some species of louse whose presence for the moment had been forgotten.

"No, Excellency."

"I cannot believe it! He is not smoke! Who was within the neighborhood of Colonel von Kleinhals?"

"Sergeant-Ordonnanz Wolf, Excellency."

"*Ja, ja!*" cried von Schmee. "But civilians, strangers? Were there any peasants? Any of whom we might make a salutary example?"

"None, sir," replied von Reuter promptly. "Three women mowing hay nearly a mile off."

"No one else?"

"A private of the Guards chopping firewood at the far end of the copse, Excellency. His name is Sieger. He comes from Posen. He affirms he saw nothing. But I am having him investigated, sir."

"Orders to the officer-of-the-day!" von Schmee snarled. "Have Private Sieger put under arrest. We will sweat him! Now, no one else?"

Von Reuter's right eyebrow, curved and black, moved upward. There was no other expression on his face.

"Madame Alys," he said, "was sunning herself down on a stone wall at the edge of the cedar wood when I searched. Just lying on the wall, Excellency, like a very pleasant cat. As she speaks only English, which I do not understand, I did not question her."

General von Schmee took a step forward. He thrust his bulging face close up to the young lieutenant. His teeth clicked beneath his beard.

"It is not for you," he said, "to comment on the way Madame Alys suns herself! Nor anything about her! I will have that pretty look wiped from your face, Herr Leutnant! Go, go! Get out of my sight! I charge you with the duty of finding K-13, or I will break you to the ranks! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"Find the spy, or I will send you to the trenches!" repeated von Schmee with rage. "You would not like that, no? No pretty ladies around you. No nice bathtubs, no clean white beds, no good wine. But only mud and lice and dead men. *Ach*, no, you would not like it! I see it in your face. As God is my witness, I think you are a coward, Herr von Reuter!"

The smooth rosy face of the young lieutenant had, it was true, paled a little. He bowed from the hips. Von Schmee laughed brutally, rubbing his hands.

"But if I find the spy, Excellency?" said von Reuter.

"*Ach!*" said von Schmee, throwing out his arms. "Find K-13 for me, and I will give you Oldemonde with all that's in it!"

Oberleutnant von Reuter screwed his monocle into place. He flashed a quick glance at Colonel von Kleinhals.

"I will find K-13 for you, Excellency," he said.

GENERAL-LEUTNANT Paul Friedrich Hermann von Schmee watched the door closing behind the Chief of Communications and his lithe young aide with blazing eyes. He burst into a torrent of guttural blasphemy. Up and down he paced, shaking his fists and raving.

"K-13 has struck again!" he swore. "The smartest, coolest, bravest of all the English! I have been warned. God in Heaven! Must I suffer myself to be plucked alive, like a fat goose?"

He pulled and twisted his black beard in strands, till it stuck out like the iron spikes on a mine all about his face. He clenched his fists and beat his forehead.

"This day's work of K-13 will go hard against me," he groaned. "The High Command will hold me to account."

K-13—such was the designation of the English for their ace of secret operatives. That much had been learned by the *Nachrichtenamt*, the great and well-drilled Department of Military Intelligence of the German Armies. But no more than the spy's designation was known, and the fact that he existed.

General-Leutnant von Schmee sat down at his desk. He rubbed his huge hands together—the hands of the Butcher, hairy and strong.

"K-13 is working alone," he thought. "Alone against our whole thoroughly organized, beautifully trained, highly paid *Nachrichtenamt*. He will not hold out long."

Yet the coolness of him, the daring of him!

On this day General von Schmee had been awaiting a full report from the German Intelligence back of the English lines concerning the strength and dispositions of the enemy. It was a work that had taken weeks in preparation. Against the weakest point of the English front the whole

Seventh Corps—of six divisions, eighty thousand men—was massed to strike in a spearhead that would cut straight through the Somme to Paris.

Yet now, without accurate knowledge of the English reserve strength in men and artillery, it would be suicide to strike. The counter-attack of K-13 had cost a smashing victory, as von Schmee knew—and perhaps had cost the war.

Von Schmee rubbed his hands together. His large, sagacious brain was working actively.

"When I get this spy they call K-13," he mouthed, "I will nail him to that door, as God is my witness! He is smart, but he can not last long alone. It is not humanly possible. He will betray himself. It will not be good for him when he is found."

He unlocked his office safe. Hidden away in between the leaves of his great code book was a secret report from the *Nachrichtenamt* on K-13. The report, von Schmee remembered, had suggested that K-13 might be a woman. It was only a wild theory, among others which the *Nachrichtenamt* had formulated concerning the unknown spy. Von Schmee thought he had better refresh his mind concerning it.

"Verdammnis!" he shrieked.

The secret report was missing from the code book. Von Schmee went through the book, page by page. He lifted it and shook it violently. A gray sweat had come on his forehead.

"Gott im Himmel!"

The door from his anteroom opened. Vrow Alys Dervanter peered in with her little elfin face. Her light green eyes were alive with merriment.

"Are you bissy, Paul?" she said.

"Come in, sweedhard," said von Schmee, smoothing his ragged beard.

He reached out and patted her wrist with a fond look. He dragged her to his knee.

"My 'ittle bittle Paulie hass some troubles?" she asked coaxingly.

"It iss nuttings," said von Schmee.

He closed his little gleaming eyes as she kissed his shaven head. He summoned a sentry and ordered wine from the musty cellars of Oldemonde. With a bottle of it—and Vrow Alys—for a little while he could forget K-13.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN FROM MISSOURI

FLIGHT CAPTAIN Tillinghast Wainwright Oakley Face, commander of the Eighth Combat Detachment of the Thirty-Ninth Wing, Royal Flying Corps, B. E. F., in Northern France, slumped back in his chair and stretched forth his feet. He was a small man, not half so big as his title. A pale eyed, pale faced, pale haired man, with a cold polished look about him, like an icicle.

"Pull off my boots, Swipes," he said.

He lifted one polished cordovan toe slyly. With a sudden vicious gesture he jabbed it into the midriff of the batman who had brought him his afternoon tea.

"I mean you!" he said. "Jump when I speak to you!"

He stretched his arms high above his head, and yawned clear back to his tonsils.

"Ho-hum! *Ho*-hum! I'm bally fed up with dodging the Archies," he said. "Bingo, down comes the flying flag. This outfit will hop no more today. We'll give Fritz his turn in the air for a change. Poor devil, he needs it. Eh, what, Swipes?"

The stalwart batman's face was round and red as an Edam cheese, and growing purple. He was an honest Yorkshire yeoman, of the pure Saxon breed—a breed that for several thousand years had not accepted a kick in the midriff without a fight, not even from the robber barons of William the Bastard. A Yorkshireman's home is his castle. And his midriff is his own private property, a thing not to be touched nor looked at nor even mentioned without his express permission.

He knelt and pulled off the captain's boots so viciously that he almost pulled that elegant officer out of his chair.

"Gad, you're a rough beggar, Swipes!" said the captain.

"Begging your pardon, sir," the batman muttered, "my name is William Sevenoaks."

"Eh, what? How's that?" said the captain, with a look of wrinkled surprise on his cold pale brow. "What's that, Swipes? Oh, Sevenoaks. What a name! Well, Swipes is quite all right, thank you, Swipes."

He rested his stockinged heels on his desk while he stirred six lumps of sugar in his tea. Carefully he lifted back his drooping blond mustaches, and drank the national beverage of Old England with a soft seeping noise. He was a little chilly. His hand with the teacup was shivering a little. But the drink warmed him. He picked up a crumpet and bit into it meditatively.

His eyes were pale as water. They were blank as fog. Captain Tillinghast Wainwright Oakley Face was thinking deeply.

"Swipes," he said, setting down his teacup after the third refilling, and drying the ends of his mustaches with a handkerchief, "tell the adjutant to send me in that blasted American pilot what-do-you-call-him—the bird with the Hun name."

"Sub-Leftenant Big Dick Fahnestock, sir?" said Swipes.

"Don't refer to officers by their nicknames, Swipes," said the captain coldly. "Fahnestock, that's the beggar I mean. Wait a minute, my man, before you go. And not such a sullen face about you, either. What I want to know is this—have you ever heard anything queer about Leftenant Fahnestock?"

"Why, no, sir. What do you mean?"

"Oh, you 'listed men spend all your time in gossip, I know. I understand rumors are going around that a Hun spy is working in the air force somewhere on this front. Anybody ever mention Fahnestock in that connection? Eh, what?"

The batman's honest face was growing more purple, till it seemed he was about ready to choke to death.

"That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of, if you'll pardon me, sir!" he exploded. "Big Dick—excuse me, sir—Leftenant Fahnestock, why, he's—he's a fighter! He's not a bleeding spy."

"Don't use vile language in my presence!" said the captain viciously. "By God, I'll cane your buttocks for you!"

"Excuse me, sir. But Leftenant Fahnestock——"

"Never been mentioned suspiciously, eh?" said the captain, pulling at his mustaches. "Never mind, Swipes. You may go. Send the adjutant in."

HE SAT musing after the batman had departed. His stockinged feet squirmed slowly. They were slender, delicate feet, as small as a woman's, and he was very proud of them. Thoughtfully he ran his forefinger around his emptied teacup and licked up the melted sugar.

"In dear old Lunnon right this minute," he reflected with a cold smile, "the way the subs are strafing the daylights out of everything that floats you can't buy this stuff for love or gold. Even in America they're beginning to ration. But this little boy gets plenty of sugar. Rather sweet for you, old Face, my lad. Eh, what?"

Beneath his colorless mustaches his thin lips were twisted in that smile. Hard and cold, like a bent icicle.

The world outside his windows was filled with the roaring of airplane motors. He peered forth with a quiet, intent look, watching the recalled Fighters sweeping down out of a smooth and cloudless sky—Sopwith two-seaters, swift, sweet ships that were piloted by men with notches on their guns. At the present time along the Somme they were hounding the Fokkers hell-for-leather out of the sky.

The little pale eyed captain stroked the ends of his mustaches. He was still smiling when the adjutant came in.

"Harvey," he said, "about this fellow, Fahnestock?"

Adjutant Harvey was a burly, middle aged officer, very neat and spruce, with a well washed, shining face. He had been broken from a majority for cowardice in the face of the enemy, and had fought his way back up to a lieutenancy in the air force from the ranks. Life had given a bitter look to his mouth. He was a man who seldom ever flew. It was no secret that he was afraid of the air.

"Fahnestock is in the air now," he said. "Flying alone, as he always does. Somewhere over Hunland."

"Over Hunland, eh?" mused the captain.

His head began to nod slowly. His eyes had slanted down.

"Here's the report from Intelligence on Fahnestock," said Adjutant Harvey. "Born an American citizen, in some place called Missouri. Parents both German. Recommended by H. M. consul at St. Louis, however. Intelligence has checked him up very thoroughly, of course. Do you want to read it?"

"Never mind," said the captain, with a flicker of his hand. "Anybody knows our own Intelligence is asinine. What do you think of Fahnestock personally?"

"He's sloppy in his dress, and insubordinate," said Harvey. "He's profane, loud voiced, democratic and uncouth. I'm always having trouble with him. Sometimes I despair of ever making a gentleman of him. However, I have not the least doubt that he is honest and loyal, and of course completely without fear. He's just another one of these half civilized Americans, with their extraordinary fighting instinct. He has an unofficial tally of nine Boche ships and four sausages."

"Unofficial, eh, what?" said the captain with an icicle smile.

"It's hard to get an official tally any more, as you know," explained Harvey patiently. "The Boches never come over our own lines. And Fahnestock has the habit of going gunning for them particularly far into Hunland, where there aren't any official observers and nothing counts on the records."

Captain Face poured out a cup of tea, now almost cold. He sipped it slowly. No shadow of his swift and multitudinous thoughts passed over his pale eyes.

"You're well acquainted with the whispers being spread around, I take it," he said, "that a secret operative of the Huns is working from the air force somewhere between St. Quentin and Cambrai?"

"Yes, sir. It's general gossip," admitted Adjutant Harvey. "And it's bad for morale."

"Do you think it's true, eh, what?"

"I'm convinced of it."

"Looks queer for Fahnestock," said the captain.

"Absurd!" snorted Harvey. "The boy hasn't the slightest ability to dissemble. He isn't intelligent enough. You can read his face like a page of print. In his own expressive American phrase, he is just a fighting fool."

Captain Face smiled coldly. He examined his elegant slim feet for a minute. He nodded his head slowly, as if something Adjutant Harvey had said confirmed a suspicion of his own.

"And nevertheless," he stated curtly, "Fahnestock is our man!"

"Incredible!" said Harvey. "I know the boy too well. I won't believe it."

"I happened to be flying over Hunland myself about four o'clock," said the captain, lowering his voice. "Tagging in and out among the clouds at ten thousand feet, what should I see but our precious American friend diving and making a landing. Well back of the Boche lines, over the border in Belgium. He never knew I was watching him, of course. He chinned a few moments with a couple of Huns, and then took off again."

"Great God, what could he have been doing?"

"It seems to me that is for Sub-Leftenant Fahnestock to answer," said the captain savagely.

Adjutant Harvey wiped his shining countenance. His mouth was bitter.

"To think of it!" he said. "Big Dick Fahnestock! I can't help having liked the boy."

"Keep this quiet!" said Captain Face sharply. "No arrest. No word to anyone. We'll give Fahnestock plenty of rope, and let him hang himself higher than a kite."

SUB-LIEUTENANT Big Dick Fahnestock of the Fighters heeled his Sopwith over on one ear, and went whistling toward the landing field ten thousand feet below. The earth rushed toward him like a hurricane. All the way down he had his head turned to the rear, watching the fluttering tail surfaces of his ship.

Strips of the linen fabric were tearing loose. They were ripping away in sharp banners through the upper sky. The framework of the stabilizers began to show naked as a dead man's bones.

"Are we going to hold together, gal?" thought Big Dick. "Are we a-going to come down in pieces, or all in a chunk?"

When the ground was less than two hundred feet below him, he leveled the ship out into a sweeping horizontal glide. His jaws were working methodically. He squinted overside, watching the ground come up. The speeding ship touched it on two points, and went across it like a bullet toward the hangars.

In the first hundred yards of the ship's fast roll the propeller dropped off her nose and went somersaulting away. In the second hundred yards she lost her right ailerons and a few yards of assorted wires. In the third hundred yards her whole shot-riddled right wing snapped from its main bolts and dragged the ground. She skeered around on the pivot of the broken wing, showering pieces of splintering struts all around her. She was just in front of the hangar doors when she came to a stop—all that was left of her.

Big Dick Fahnestock, who had been sitting very tensely and expectantly, sagged down in his seat then and wiped the oily stubble on his cheeks. He began to chew vigorously once more.

"What do you call that, Big?" shrieked a little yellow faced pilot, doubling up with laughter. "A speed drill in knocking a ship down on the run?"

Big Dick spat overside.

"Fritz sieved me, Washee," he said. "Looked for a while like the whole damned ship was going to drop away off me, and leave me to fly home on my seat cushion. What's the hot idea of calling the boys in? Three hours more of clear, sweet daylight still left in the sky, and we're cleaning Fritz up five miles back of his own lines."

"His Ludship Captain Fairy Face is swilling his afternoon tea, Big," said Washee. "The spitting and whooping of combat motors disturbs his sensitive eardrums."

Washee's name was Lee Long. He was reputed to be part Chinese. He had been born on or near the wharfs of London, had been a choir boy in New York, a jockey in Havana, a dice man in Buenos Ayres, and had been married or jailed at least once in practically every other metropolis of any claim to prominence on the habitable globe. He was small and black headed, with an extraordinarily ugly wrinkled face. He was commonly reputed to have no religion. Yet he believed devoutly in one God, which was Big Dick Fahnestock.

"Adj Harvey is looking for you, you Missouri jackass," he said.

"Mule is the word," said Big Dick.

"Mule or jackass, they're all the same to me," said Washee.

"They may be to a jackass," said Dick. "But they ain't to a mule."

"Anyway, old Harvey's looking for you," said Washee. "He's all boiling over. A pun to tuppence he wants to warn you again about chewing gum. How do you expect Fritz to have any regard for you when every time he sees you you are running after him with ten cents' worth of Spearmint stuck in your face and your jaws working like a poppet valve? No wonder he's given up meeting you socially. You're supposed to be an officer and a swell, Big."

"It's not chewing gum, it's Old Horse Plug," said Big Dick Fahnestock with a grin.

He stretched his huge arms and climbed clumsily out of the wreck. He was a rangy giant, with mild brown eyes, square-knotted jaws, and a fighting man's snub nose. His face was brown as a nut, and adorned at the moment with three days growth of golden beard.

"Old Horse Plug, Washee," he said. "And nothing else but. I buy it off a frog farmer down near Compeigne that makes it out of fertilizer. Say, Washee, I saw old Fairy Face hopping it alone 'way to hell and gone north of the lines about an hour ago. He looked like he had come skimming clean from Belgium. I slid down a couple of thousand feet to say hello, but all I got was a dirty look. Is anyone using the mess bathtub? I got to scrub that there look off. It was so dirty it got mud clean back in my ears."

HE STALKED across the field to officers' quarters, whistling *"O du lieber Augustin!"* in a mournful monotone. Big Dick Fahnestock never walked, he stalked, with his heavy shoulders swinging clumsily and his feet shambling forward in a clodhopping stride. To watch him in his ordinary gait no one would ever know that, when he really wanted to make speed, he was one of the fastest 220 men who ever flashed down a cinder path.

In the wardroom, which he shared with Washee Long and six other pilots, he dragged out a small, green-painted tin bathtub, the pride of the detachment. He was sloshing pails of hot water from the kitchen into it, when Adjutant Harvey opened the door.

Trimly tailored and shining faced, pipe-clayed and polished, Harvey leaned his burly frame against the doorpost. He looked Dick up and down.

"Fahnestock," he said sharply, without any preliminaries, "I see you haven't shaved yet. I don't want to warn you again."

Big Dick sighed. He shifted his quid to the other cheek.

"Adj," he said, "quit picking on me. I just shaved the tail off a Fokker monoplane. Which would you rather have, my whiskers or the Hun ship?"

"You claim another?" said Harvey coolly. "Any witnesses?"

Big Dick didn't catch the note of suspicion in the voice of the adjutant.

"Three other Jerries," he said, "but they turned tail and ran. I'm not looking for glory, Adj, and it wasn't nothing to speak of. They was four of them, but only one Fritz stood up to meet me, with those three yellow buzzards beating it down the sky. He was a game little guy, too, and he put up a good fight. He went burning down a mile before his ship broke up."

Adjutant Harvey came in slowly. There was disbelief in his steady gaze.

"Fahnestock," he said, "your blouse is unbuttoned and your shirt isn't any too clean. There's a filthy streak of soot across it. You're supposed to be an officer of the Armies of His Brittanic Majesty. You're the sloppiest dresser that ever wore the uniform. Button your blouse up and get yourself some clean linen."

Big Dick chewed quietly and patiently. He wiped his oily hands on his breeches.

"Adj," he said, "that there streak is the mark of a tracer that whistled across my belly. And I buttoned the Fritz that kissed me with it into his coffin, as I'm telling you. What's this—a game of button-button? I thought it was a war."

Adjutant Harvey muttered a few indistinguishable—though no doubt unpleasant—words between his teeth.

"Oh, go back and play marbles," said Dick.

He peeled, and eased himself carefully into the little tub. He sat with his chin on his knees, surrounded by a steamy vapor. The muscles stood out like twisted ropes on his back. He lathered his face and scalp.

"There's a plug in my pants pocket, Adj," he said. "Bite yourself off a big fat chew."

Harvey stood looking down at him.

"I understand you've been out over Hunland," he said. "What doing?"

"Me?" said Dick. "I'm telling you. Playing tag and leaping frog with some little Jerry playmates. Souse a bucket of that there water over my head, will you? I got soap in my eyes."

"Fahnestock," said the adjutant, "just what is your reason for being in this war?"

"Why?" said Dick. "Is there any movement under way to get me out of this war?"

"You're not English, not a bit of you," said Harvey slowly. "You're an American citizen, I know. But by ancestry——"

"Let's omit the ancestry," said Dick. "I'm in this war, if you want to know, because it's one hot-dog of a fight. If you know of a better, lead me to it. I like to fight, Adj. I'm built that way. Maybe you don't understand it, but it's so."

A flush crept over Harvey's shiny face. His glance shifted away. He had been broken for cowardice in battle, and it was a shame he could not forget.

"Yes," he said bitterly, "it's amazing how the lower classes take to fighting."

Big Dick grinned. He extracted the quid of Old Horse Plug from his cheek and hurled it out the window. He felt sorry for Harvey. Meditatively he swabbed out the crevices between his toes.

"Sure, I'm lower class," he drawled. "My old man's a plain onery Grundy County hog farmer, since you've been mentioning ancestry, and my granddad wrassled mules."

"Wrassled mules?" said Harvey.

"Sure, with the Hagenback Circuses," said Dick. "A dollar to granddad if he downed the mule, and a peck of oats to the mule if he downed granddad. Or maybe it was the other way around."

"Most extraordinary!" said Harvey.

"The old boy came from Hamburg, Germany," said Dick. "He used to be a blacksmith back in the old country. He never forged any of his ironwork, either. He used to bite it off and trim it down with his teeth—horseshoes, nails, anything he wanted. He taught me a lot of his tricks, too, Adj. I can still knock out any mule with one wallop of my fist. Or any jackass, either."

Grinning, he stood up in the tub and stretched his mighty arms. *"Yee-how!"* he screeched. He soaped his stomach and splashed down again. The water cascaded up around him. It splattered over

Harvey's fawn colored breeches. Harvey wiped them anxiously with a handkerchief, scrambling back against the wall.

Big Dick was grinning still as he climbed out and began to dry himself with a big brown towel. But in his quiet eyes there was the same deep light that came in them when he was diving at three miles a minute on the tail of a running Fokker.

"Lower class as hell, Adj," he said. "And so are all the Fighters. Look at old Handsome Redburn—used to be a Welsh colliery boy. Look at Mud-Face Mortimer. His old man is only Baron Aleshire, that runs the biggest string of saloons in Liverpool. Look at Washee Long. I don't want to be any lower class than *that* boy. He hedgehopped straight down Fritzie's second line trenches yesterday, so lower class his wheels was almost touching, and drilled a swell Hun gentleman colonel with a swagger stick and blue blood written all over him right through the left eyeball. It sure must have given that blue-blooded gent an awful pain in the rump when he woke up in hell and found he'd been lower-classed off that way by a Limehouse louse that drinks his soup and can't even spit in Latin. *Yee-how!*"

Adjutant Harvey looked at Big Dick long and steadily.

"Fahnestock," he said, "you're a low order of animal. But, by God, you have your virtue. You're the most fearless man I've ever known. Whatever you are, or whatever you do, I'll give you credit for being brave. It's a virtue I admire. I can't help liking you."

"Thanks, Adj," said Dick. "Dry my back, will you?"

BIG Dick Fahnestock wondered what was going on behind the colorless eyes of Captain Tillinghast Wainwright Oakley Face. But the mind of the commanding officer of the Eight Combat Flight was a mystery even to his own Fighters.

The captain flashed Dick only one glance as he entered, fresh from his bath and in a uniform reasonably spotless. The captain sat at his desk, sorting over a mass of official papers with delicate hands. He gave a curt nod to Dick's salute and motioned to a chair. There was a very piercing quality in his pale eyes which seemed to have bored Dick through with that one brief glance.

"Mind if I take a chew?" said Dick.

The captain didn't answer him. Damned old Fairy Face!

The captain wrote at length, with a pen in a rapidly flowing hand. He snapped together a handful of papers with a rubber band, and arose, thrusting the packet into his safe. Suddenly and sharply he heeled about, staring at Dick.

"German-American, eh, what?" he said.

"American," drawled Dick.

The eyes of the Englishman were like ice. But he smiled at Dick.

"No disgrace," he said. "George Hanover himself, His Most Britannic Majesty, is seven-eighths German, and first cousin to Wilhelm Hohenzollern. The Germans are a remarkable people, Fahnestock, and no denying it. They've jolly well near licked the world. Don't be ashamed of being German."

He lit a pipe and cocked his head. Those icy eyes didn't flicker. His precise, sharp voice has suddenly taken on a friendly note. Man-to-man stuff. But there was no friendliness in his eyes.

"Sure, they're a remarkable people," said Dick coolly. "They are swell fighters. That's why I'm in this man's war, Captain. I wouldn't want to be scrapping a bunch of rabbits."

The pale Englishman nodded quickly.

"You have a little sneaking admiration for them, eh, what, Fahnestock?"

Big Dick walked to the window and spat.

"My granddad came from Hamburg," he replied steadily. "My mother was born in Berlin. My name is Richard Wagner Fahnestock, and I like pretzels and sauerkraut, and I could cuss in Hoch Deutsch before I knew a word of English. And you can take all that and stick it in your hat. I'm as American as Bunker Hill monument. I'm fighting this war with everything I've got. That's all you need to know. I hope I've answered whatever questions may be sneaking around in the back of your mind, various and sundry."

Captain Face made a quick gesture.

"Yes," he said. "The report of your, ah, fighting activities has come to me. You have been doing quite a bit of flying well into German territory."

Big Dick felt his cheeks burning before the cold steady gaze of the English officer.

Little spots of light danced in front of his eyes. He advanced a half step unconsciously. His big hands were opening and closing.

"I know what you're thinking!" he said.

The captain pulled his long mustaches.

"Maybe you do," he said politely.

"Oh, yes I do!" said Big Dick with burning anger. "And I've been waiting for someone to say it or think it. Everybody knows a Hun spy is at work in one of the squadrons on this front. Everybody knows he's been dropping information back of Fritz's lines. And I've been waiting for some rat to pin it onto me. The great, brilliant, illuminating thought has suddenly exploded in your cranium that I'm this Hun. Be a man, and say it!"

Captain Face edged a step backward. He puffed his pipe a moment in silence.

"Why, not at all, Fahnestock," he said blandly. "To be honest with you, such a suspicion has never even remotely entered my thoughts!"

The little spots of fire still danced before Dick's eyes. He took a deep breath.

"Thanks, Captain," he said simply.

"Such a suspicion would be absurd."

"Thanks, Captain."

"Utterly ridiculous!"

"I'm much obliged to you for saying so, sir."

The captain lowered his voice. He stepped up close to Dick.

"It is about another matter entirely I want to see you," he said confidentially. "A far more important matter. There is no question at all of your, ah, loyalty, Fahnestock. But I should like to know, can you keep a secret? Eh, what?"

His light eyes stared around him quickly now. His meager body seemed to have stiffened. With a cautionary nod to Dick, he walked across to the door silently in his stockinged feet, opened it, and peered out. There was no one beyond. He locked the door then, while Dick watched with a feeling of sharpening suspense.

The captain's pale brow was glistening with sweat. It was plain he was terrified. Yet there was no visible nor conceivable danger. Big Dick Fahnestock understood that Captain Face—like many a braver and many a more cowardly man—was for reasons of his own afraid of something that could not be seen.

And that is the greatest terror of all.

THE silence ticked. The captain drew up a chair. He stared hard at Dick. He talked in an almost inaudible whisper, shielding his mouth with his hand.

"Confidentially, Fahnestock," he whispered, "I'm in Intelligence, you know."

"I didn't know, sir," said Dick.

"Are you trustworthy, Fahnestock?" whispered the captain, staring him through. "Can you keep confidential what I tell you, whatever happens?"

Big Dick shifted his quid to the other side of his face.

"I've always aimed to be square, if that's what you mean," he said. "And I reckon I can keep my trap shut as well as the next man. But I'm not yearning for any deep heart-to-heart confessions, Captain. If that's what you're getting all set to breathe into my ear, you'll have to excuse me."

"Ever hear of K-13?" said the pale Englishman.

Dick rolled his mild brown eyes. It seemed to him that the captain's knees were shivering faintly. He had barely breathed the name.

"You mean the spy?" said Dick.

The captain swallowed his Adam's apple. He nodded.

"He's the best we've got, isn't he?" said Dick. "I've heard kind of rumors about him. In fact, I reckon the whole Army is buzzing about him. They say he's got the Hun general staff half paralyzed. Knows everything the Huns are planning to do. Do you mean to say that you are——"

Again the captain swallowed. He shook his head.

"No, no!" he said. "Not I!"

He gave a curious short laugh, more like a bark.

"I am working close to K-13, you understand," he went on in a low voice, "but I don't know who he is. No man knows, Fahnestock. Haig himself doesn't know. Kitchener was the only man who ever knew. But he carried the secret of K-13 with him to the bottom of the sea. K-13 is just a number, working in the dark."

"Well?" said Dick.

"The Germans would give a million pounds to catch him," the captain muttered. "They would give an army corps. And they're on his trail! But they haven't caught him yet, Fahnestock. Not yet."

He arose softly. He moved his finger over a huge map that covered half a wall.

"Do you know the château of Oldemonde, Fahnestock?" he said. "Eighty-five kilometers northeast of us, over the border?"

"A Red Cross hospital." Dick nodded.

The captain's cold smile flickered briefly again. He leaned over Dick's shoulder and spoke quickly, in a whisper no louder than a falling leaf.

"Von Schmee's headquarters—the Seventh Corps of Falkenhayn's Army of the West!" he breathed. "Confidential! Never let a hint of this get out to any man!"

"I'll be jiggered," said Dick.

"K-13 is working there," said the captain.

Dick felt a cold spot creeping slowly down his spine, like a cold little spider.

"Good luck to him," he said soberly. "I'd not like to be in his boots. I'd rather do my fighting in the open sky. What if they got on to him?"

"The Hun secret service knows he is at Oldemonde," said the captain. "He is very clever, but he can't last much longer. Leftenant Fahnestock, I am sending you up there to rescue him."

"Me?" said Big Dick, punching his breast. "I don't know him, sir."

"No one else does," said the captain.

He paced up and down in his stockinged feet. Up and down. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief of pale blue silk.

"Tonight, Leftenant Fahnestock," he said, "you will rob my safe of those papers you saw me putting into it. You will steal a ship and desert to the enemy. I will arrange all the circumstances surrounding your desertion, so that it will appear genuine to the last detail. The German Intelligence, which will check up on you through their own operatives in the English lines, will be convinced of your sincerity. Once in Oldemonde, you will locate K-13. How you do that, I leave to your wits."

"You want me," said Dick, "to hop up there alone into the middle of the whole damned German Army, and pick up a bird I don't even know the looks of? Do I look like a crack-brained fool?"

"You're the man I've picked," said the captain.

"And what if I don't choose to go?"

"My orders are not a question of choosing or refusing," said the captain delicately.

"It's not in my line," said Dick, shaking his head. "I can't pretend, Captain. I haven't got the brains. I'm a fighter, not a spy. I'll forget what you've told me, sir, and you can pick some other bird to play the game with K-13. If that is all——"

He arose, stretching his mighty arms. Captain Face advanced on him with soft fury.

"Allow me to suggest," he said between his teeth, "that there is a certain undercurrent of suspicion against you now, Leftenant Fahnestock. We both know the rumor that a Hun spy is in our lines. Perhaps one as clever as K-13. Who knows? Men are asking if you may be that spy, Leftenant——"

"If I met any bird," said Big Dick, "who told me he thought I was a damned Hun spy, I'd knock his chin clean through the roof of his mouth. Do you know of anybody in particular who's making such aspersions, Captain?"

"No one in particular," said the captain hastily.

"I'd not be any good to your friend K-13 on the job you've outlined," said Big Dick. "More'n likely I'd only help the Huns to catch him. I'm only a flying fool, and when I got up there in the middle of the Huns, with all of them pawing over me, I'd be liable to get sore at something, Captain, and bust loose. You're my C. O. You can try to make me go through with this job. And I can try to make you give birth to a litter of bull elephants. If it can't be done, it can't be done. You can go and stick that up the rear entrance of a squirrel's nest."

The colorless eyes of Captain Tillinghast Wainwright Oakley Face narrowed. They had a steel glitter.

"Are you afraid?" he said. "Are you a blasted coward?"

"Not that I know of," said Big Dick. "Did I understand you to refer to me as such?"

"Control yourself, Leftenant," said the Englishman coldly, stepping backward as Dick advanced. "I am not saying it. I am asking it."

"Oh!" said Dick. "Well, it may be a fair question."

He chewed grimly. He walked to the window and spat.

"Since you've been so kind as to ask me," he said, in a slow, deep, rolling, peaceful voice. "I'll tell you. Any of the Fighters could tell you the same thing, but you've asked me. You're yearning for information, I see. And I'm glad to help out a bright little guy that's trying to increase his fund of information.

"You ask me if I'm a coward," he said. "Well, I don't know about that. But I know I'm not afraid of anything in the air or on the ground or down at the bottom of a cistern. I'm not afraid of anything that flies or crawls or hops or flops or struts around in a pair of Bond Street breeches. I'm not afraid of mice or lice or thousand-legged bugs or little twirps that have a couple of long blond hairs growing where cats and men have whiskers.

"I'm going on this job," he said. "I'll bring back K-13, if I have to bring back von Schmee and every stone in Oldemonde and the Kaiser's winter underwear. And when I get back, Captain, sir," he said, "I'm going to grab hold of a certain pasty-faced, tea-lapping, foxy-faced little squirt whom we both know without mentioning any names, and I'm going to turn him bottom end up over my knee, and I'm going to fan his breeches.

"Do I make myself clear, sir?" he said.

The captain wet his lips. He didn't answer.

Big Dick Fahnestock saluted smartly. He bit off a large meal of Old Horse Plug. He hitched up his belt, and stalked out.

CAPTAIN Tillinghast Wainwright Oakley Face watched the tall, wild American flier departing, with expressionless eyes. Yet his teeth were clicking together softly and viciously. There was murder in him. Black murder.

He moved to the windows, and stared out at the field on which the darkness of night had fallen. The hangars were battened down. Their great camouflaged bulks loomed like masses of rocks in the gathering dark. The rain clouds had passed out of the sky, and stars were twinkling like hot electric points. For an hour or more Captain Face stood at the window, without moving a finger, without moving an eyelash.

He was a man of iron control. He could hide his thoughts. Yet there was black murder in him. It ate his vitals like a living beast.

After a time there was his batman, William Sevenoaks, rapping at the door, bringing late supper to the captain. The captain stirred from his motionless pose. A sudden thought came to him. Delicately as a cat he tiptoed over to his desk and pulled a long narrow rod out of it, which he thrust beneath his arm.

He faced the door then with a diabolic look.

"Come in!" he said, in answer to that respectful tapping.

"Swipes," he said, when the stalwart Yorkshireman had entered, bearing a tray, "Swipes, I've seen various signs and indications that you're a bit fed up on this job. Eh, what?"

The batman's flaming countenance grew even ruddier.

"Begging your pardon, sir," he stammered, "I try to do my duty. But it's not what I'm used to, nor what I 'listed for. I'm a plain, simple countryman, sir, and no servant. I don't like, sir, being kicked in the stummick and being called dirty names. I don't like, sir, being caned like I was a bloody dog. Begging your pardon, sir, but since you've been so kind as to ask me, I will make bold to say that you treat me like a blasted Prooshian. And things have come to such a state, sir, there're times when I'd rather be dead."

He gulped and choked.

The captain regarded him malignly.

"You want a transfer, eh, what?" he said in a hard, sharp voice.

"If you would be so kind as to arrange it, sir," said the batman humbly.

His thick thumbs were hooked in his orderly belt. He stood up straight, with his blue Saxon eyes smiling, while his captain walked slowly toward him. Lightly as a cat the captain crept up, and there was a very cruel look about his face. The glance of the Yorkshireman passed beyond the cruel face of the captain. For the moment William Sevenoaks was staring with a certain wistfulness out at the starry night.

"You will have your transfer!" said the captain.

"Thank you, sir. And when?"

"Now!" said the captain.

And by this time Captain Face had stepped up very close to William Sevenoaks, to this stalwart English soldier whom he called Swipes. From beneath his arm he pulled, with an incredibly quick gesture, the rod which he had taken from his desk a little while before. And that rod was a Maxim silencer, with a pistol at one end.

The thing made no sound that the sentry beyond the door could have heard. By and by the captain sat down with a pale smile, dipping lumps of sugar in his tea.

CHAPTER III

THE GERMAN SPY

AT ELEVEN o'clock that night Sub-Lieutenant Richard W. Fahnestock, R. F. C., aroused the hangar night watch and ordered a two-seater Sopwith to be fueled and run out on the field.

This act, as well as certain other queer acts of his that are here set down, was later testified to in a drumhead court martial, convened to try Lieutenant Fahnestock on the charge of being a deserter and a spy.

"I want to see if the ship's tuned up," was all the explanation he gave to the hangar watch.

Though at the time the sergeant of the watch had no suspicion that there was anything traitorous under way, it struck him that Big Dick Fahnestock was extraordinarily uneasy. He seemed to talk with difficulty, so that the sergeant had to ask him to repeat his orders.

" 'Tis a queer hour, sir, for tuning up a ship," said the sergeant respectfully, "if you don't mind my saying so."

Adjutant Harvey heard the bellowing of the Rolls motor cutting the profound silence of the airdrome, just at the moment he was turning in for the night. He came running across the darkness from officers' quarters, joining up with the officer of the day on the way over.

"A raid?" he shrieked.

" 'Tis Leftenant Fahnestock, sir!" the sergeant yelled above the motor roar. "He's took a notion in the head to tune the ship up."

The motor was new out of the crate. It roared with a beautiful strong song. After testing it full on, while the hangar watch strained to hold back on the quivering wings, Big Dick throttled it down to bare idling speed. He climbed out.

"Are you drunk, Fahnestock?" demanded the adjutant.

Big Dick shook his head, his eyes on the ground.

"Just tuning her up," he muttered.

"What's wrong with you, man?" the adjutant complained. "You act as if you were about to set fire to an orphans' asylum. By God, I never saw you with such a hangdog look before. Button your blouse up! Where's your hat?"

"Oh, take a dose of castor oil!" muttered Big Dick.

Shaking his iron-gray head, Adjutant Harvey walked back across the field with Lieutenant Mud-Face Mortimer, the officer of the day. They discussed Big Dick in low voices. Undoubtedly he had been acting strangely. Mortimer gave it as his opinion that the wild American ace had become slightly balmy with too much flying.

"It's got poor Big," he said gloomily. "I've always said it would. He's gone queer."

In a few minutes a sentry hurried out of the captain's quarters. A shade in the captain's office flickered twice. Big Dick Fahnestock was loafing beside the Sopwith, watching. Immediately he stalked toward the captain's quarters.

Captain Face was expecting him. The windows were all shaded. Only a small kerosene lamp was burning beside the safe. On the floor against the wall Dick made out the form of William Sevenoaks, the captain's batman, lying face down in the eerie shadows. He was dead to this world.

The captain was nervous as a cat. He jumped up quickly from a rumpled cot as Dick came in. His pale forehead glistened with sweat in the hot, still night.

"Asleep," he whispered, motioning to the recumbent form of the batman. "He'll not wake up! I've dismissed the outside sentry on an errand. He'll be back in five minutes or less. You'll have to hurry it through."

Dick surveyed him grimly. The shadows of the flickering lamp darted over the captain's countenance, giving him not a very pleasant look.

"There's a crowbar," whispered the captain between his teeth. "Pry the safe door of its hinges. It's no more than a tin can. You're the strong kind of a beggar who can do it. Here are the papers you are to take with you. Button them up safely. Put them only into the hands of Colonel von Kleinhals or von Schmee himself. Can you rip the safe? Good! The more rough work you do with it, the better. Remember, the German Intelligence on this side will be sending through a report on you. You've got to make it look real."

The cast iron safe was old and battered. One hinge pin was missing from it. A chip in the doorframe gave entrance for the crowbar. Dick pried and sweated.

"Before I get through with it I'll make it look like it had been blown up with TNT," he grunted. "My granddad wasn't a Dutch blacksmith for nothing."

The captain gave him a pistol with a shaking hand.

"Bang that off before you go," he whispered. "Then run like a fiend for your ship. Wait a half sec. You'd better tie me securely, eh, what? And give me a bit of a bruise, you know. Just something to look like I had put up a fight. In God's name, there must be no suspicion I have had any part in this!"

ADJUTANT Harvey was preparing for bed. He had just pulled off his pigskin boots, and was hopping around the floor trying to skin himself out of his beautiful fawn breeches, when someone knocked at his wardroom door.

"Who's there?"

"Messenger from the captain, sir."

The adjutant hastily pulled his breeches on again, and let the fellow in.

"Compliments of Captain Face, sir," said the sentry, saluting. "And he directs you to present himself to him immediately, bringing with you the report on Leftenant Fahnestock. He says you will know what he means, sir. The report of Intelligence. You were discussing it with him after tea."

"Immediately?"

"Yes, sir."

"I wonder what's happened?" muttered Harvey.

"Him and Big Dick was having a long hot argument around supper time, so I hear," said the sentry guardedly. "I understand they was calling each other all the names in the book."

"You'd better sew a couple of buttons on your ears, and stop eavesdropping on your superior officers," grunted Harvey.

A minute or more had elapsed before the spruce adjutant had his field boots neatly laced. He marched at a deliberate pace to the administration building, at the far end of the field from the captain's quarters, accompanied by the sentry. The officer of the day, Lieutenant the Honorable Mud-Face Mortimer, Lord Aleshire's heir, was sitting in the outer office, drinking coffee with Washee Long.

"What's in the wind, Adj?" asked Mortimer.

"The captain thinks he's on the trail of this Hun spy," whispered Harvey, shaking his head.

"In this outfit?'

"So he says."

"Old Fairy Face is full of little fleas," growled Mortimer. "There's not one of the Fighters he dares accuse. It's a stinking insult to every man in the outfit."

Washee Long rolled his slant black eyes. His head swayed. His ugly wrinkled face was white as paper. It was apparent that he was enjoying the tag end of a binge. He hauled a bottle of cognac out of his coat and mixed it half and half with his coffee.

"Who is the Fairy trying to pin it on?" he snarled.

Adjutant Harvey only shook his head.

"I know," snarled Washee. "Big Dick Fahnestock. If Big is a traitor, then I'm the Queen of Spain. I warn you, Adj. Fairy Face had better think twice. Think twice!" he shouted.

He stumbled to his feet and smashed the cognac bottle down on the O. D.'s desk. Flying splinters of glass showered about him.

"That's what I'll do to him!" he said.

"Don't threaten your superior officers!" said Harvey.

He went to his desk and unlocked from it the report which he had been directed to furnish. He stepped out into the starry night again, and heard the puttering of the Sopwith which Big Dick had left on the field. He had not gone three paces from the administration building when a sudden scream of pain and fright rang out in the deep silence across the field.

"What was that?" gasped Harvey.

"Captain's room!" yelled the sentry, breaking forth into a mad run.

The scream was followed by a single pistol shot. The echoes of it went banging and banging away. Out of the captain's quarters leaped the tall, awkward form of Big Dick Fahnestock. In the starry night there was no mistaking him. He was waving a pistol in his hand. He ran toward the idling Sopwith like the wind.

"Fahnestock!"

Windows banged up. Men in baracks.

suddenly awakened, added their shouts to the uproar. From all over the field sentries were running. Adjutant Harvey cut across the field after Big Dick's fleet figure. Mortimer and Washee Long drew ahead of him. But Big Dick, when on his toes, had a stride like a racehorse. The shouting men might as well have tried to catch greased lightning.

He ran to the Sopwith and vaulted aboard. The startled mechanics of the night hangar watch made a half-hearted effort to grab the wings. The sergeant in command of them ran to the side of the cockpit to remonstrate, but a wave of Big Dick's pistol drove him back.

"Big! Big, boy! What's happened?" little Washee Long was shrieking in a despairing voice.

But Big Dick made no answer to the man who was his buddy. He ducked his head and jammed the throttle open. With a loud yell, over the field the fast ship raced away. A cursing sentry raised his rifle to fire at it, but Washee Long knocked the muzzle aside.

Up toward the starry night the ship zoomed like a rocket. High, high it shot, and keeled about, heading north. Its black shadow cut across the Big Dipper. Its roar faded to a whisper. Soon against the far horizon its shadow passed away. The hard little stars were glittering again in an empty sky.

THEY found Captain Tillinghast Wainwright Oakley Face lying, bound hand and foot, against the door of his broken safe. One badly discolored eye was almost swollen shut. His lips were puffed and bleeding. He spat out a few broken teeth.

"The bloody beggar smashed me!" he mumbled. "By God, he hauled off and pasted me! Feel my jaw! Is it broken?"

A sentry cut the cords that bound his ankles and wrists. He clambered dizzily to his feet, staring around him with a pale watchful look.

"What a wallop!" he moaned, feeling his jaw. "I never expected the blasted fellow would hit so hard!"

Washee Long had darted to a corner of the room. He rolled over the motionless form of Sevenoaks, the captain's batman. The blue eyes of the Yorkshire yeoman were opened wide, staring at the ceiling. But there was no light in them. And his hands were cold. His breast was cold and still.

"Through the heart!" said Washee.

He was sober now. There was a hard, watchful look about him.

Captain Face hobbled over, pulling at his teeth. He touched the murdered man with a delicate toe. He stared down with a pale, steady glance.

"Yes, Sevenoaks, poor beggar!" he said. "A good fellow, loyal and devoted. I was very fond of him. Fahnestock, the damned spy, shot him down without a prayer."

Washee's slant black eyes narrowed, till they were thin as pencil marks.

"But cold as a lobster," he muttered. "You'd think he had been two hours dead."

More and more of the Fighters were pouring into the room, many of them only half dressed or in bathrobes. In the confusion Washee's sharp observation was unnoticed.

The captain now turned to his safe. The door had been sprung from its hinges. He made a great bustle of rummaging through it, mouthing and muttering.

"It's worse, far worse than I feared," he muttered.

"In God's name, what's been stolen?" cried Harvey.

"Information of incalculable value to the enemy," said the captain. "The blasted spy must have been planning this coup a long time."

He confronted the excited throng of Fighters with a pale glance. He held up his hand for silence, with the little finger of it curved like a hook.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you have been witnesses to an act of the most stupendous treachery. There is not one of you more astounded and shocked than myself. If we had not seen it, we could not believe it. I have shared your admiration for the apparent honesty and fighting courage of the man we have known as Leftenant Richard Fahnestock. Yet, as Adjutant Harvey can tell you, I have had reasons to suspect him. Gentlemen, we must accept the bitter truth. Leftenant Fahnestock is a Hun spy. He has been working all along with the enemy, in the pay of the German Intelligence."

Two or three of the Fighters were whispering. But most of them were deathly silent. Washee Long crouched on the floor beside the body of Sevenoaks. He clasped his knees, rocking back and forth on his heels.

"You lie!" he screamed defiantly.

"Arrest him!" said the captain coldly.

"He's drunk, sir," said Adjutant Harvey. . . .

"Arrest him, and confine him in quarters!"

Shrieking and fighting, Washee was led out between two sentries.

"This frightful affair has hurt me more than any of you," said the captain in tones of profound grief. "Yet, in a way, I am glad. It clears the air of suspicion. There need be no longer any whispering about a Hun traitor in the flying force. No longer need each of us regard our comrades with mistrust. The traitor is out in the open at last. And Leftenant Richard Fahnestock is that man. . . .

"Adjutant," he said, "take steps for the summoning of a general court martial immediately."

"Do you think Fahnestock will be returning to stand trial?" said Harvey bitterly.

"He will be tried *in absentia,*" said Captain Face. "I am quite sure we shall never see him again."

He dabbed his pale forehead with a handkerchief of light blue silk. The corners of his mouth were twitching. He covered it with the handkerchief in his right hand. And the little finger of that hand moved like a hook across his mouth—the little finger which had been broken, and had grown crooked, and could never be straight again.

CHAPTER IV

THE JAWS OF VON SCHMEE

STRAIGHT northeast by north Big Dick Fahnestock held the bow of his droning ship, keeping Polaris on a line with the inboard strut of his left wing.

A head wind was set against him. Yet even so he estimated he was making a ground speed of sixty knots. He moved at eight thousand feet. The black earth passed below him like a plate of black glass. He was into Hunland now. He would be over Oldemonde before midnight.

Suddenly fingers of searchlights shot up from the surface of the lightless and impenetrable ground. The sound of his motor had been heard by the German A. A. detectors. The pale lights felt around for him through the starry sky. They pierced through cobwebs of thin white cloud, creeping and fingering.

A luminous ray crept on him, and stayed like a terrible blinding eye. It bathed his struts and flying wires with a ghostly glow. He saw his propeller turning like a cascade of silver water. Steeply he keeled his ship over, and sideslipped down. The black wind whistled against his cheek. He was in the vast darkness again, and a half mile away, before the Archies began to bark.

Again the searchlights were fingering.

"They'll be keeping the wires hot all along the front," he thought with a grin. "Solitary British Sopwith detected flying north. Fritz won't get much sleep tonight."

Once more they caught him, and he whipped over into the darkness before the A. A. gunners had the range. He climbed through the moonless sky. At fifteen thousand feet he ran into a tangle of thin cloud. He lifted above it a hundred feet and held his course steadily. Below his keel the cloud rushed like a river of tenuous spindrift, vaporous and opaque.

The beams of the searchlights went slipping over the under surface of the cloud. But they could not penetrate it. It beat them back like a mirror. Again and again they passed below him, those anxious beams, dull as moons reflected under a pale water.

Tiny points of fire began to spot the invisible earth here and there. The A. A.'s were firing blind, dividing the sky into sectors, bracketing his estimated position and trying for a lucky shot. But the sky is a big place. Even so, one shrapnel burst flowered out less than a hundred yards below him. A ragged hole appeared in his left lower wing, and the linen began to strip itself away.

"Oh, quit throwing them things at me!" he said.

He leaned overside, with one eye closed, chewing vigorously. When he saw the flash of an A. A. battery blooming directly below him, he spat.

The blind firing ceased after a hot three minutes. The creeping searchlights, far to the rear now, one by one winkled out. In the beam of the last pale light he caught a glimpse of a flock of Gotha bombers moving southward miles below. Then the last flash died. There was nothing more to be seen on earth or in the sky but the small twinkling stars.

FROM twenty miles away he picked up the lights of Oldemonde. He slipped through the dark, chill wind toward that gleam. At first no bigger and brighter than a glowworm, it grew clearer, a solitary beacon on the vast expanse of the world.

The droning Sopwith ate up the dark air miles. A huge electric cross laid out on the grounds of the pseudo-hospital grew definite in shape.

"You lying skunks!" thought Dick. "If I had a bomb-rack of Mark IV's I'd hospital the pack of you to Kingdom Come."

The Red Cross is seldom ever misused in warfare, in spite of the accusations of misuse which the belligerents were continually hurling at each other. Violation of the symbol is too apt to be a boomerang. Only the rarely unscrupulous and criminal commander such as Lieutenant-General von Schmee, the Butcher, a man who had a black name even among his own people, a thief without pride and a murderer without remorse, would hide under the humanitarian flag with such contempt of the laws of warfare.

"Wonder how long Fairy Face has known the Butcher's lair?" thought Dick. "Why don't they sic the bombers onto him, and blow his nest a mile in the air?"

He slid along the sky, watching the château move beneath his wing. This was farther north than he was accustomed to do his hopping. Yet three or four times he had escorted bombing formations of Handley-Pages as far as Oldemonde, on their way to raid the great ammunition dumps near Brussels.

He had spent the last two hours in an intensive study of photographic maps. A detailed picture of the topography of the false hospital was clear in his mind. In front of the ancient stone pile was a carp pond of a half acre in extent, set in smooth velvet lawns. To the east were broad green forests of beach and elm, developed as a deer park. Behind the château, to the northward, was a small thick cedar wood, which even in the clearest day made a black ribbon on the ground. Beyond the cedars were cultivated fields and broad rolling meadowlands grown to hay.

He carried no parachute flares. There was no light of the moon. The illuminated cross, spread out on the lawns beside the carp pond, offered the best landing. He kept his glance on it steadily.

"Down there, old gal," he said softly to his droning ship, "is the smartest, toughest Hun that ever lived. And with him are a whole hornet's nest of wise babies. They'd have to be wise, or they wouldn't have been able to land themselves soft staff berths. And we're going to take a nice dive into that tank of man-eating crocodiles. Does it sound pretty? It does not. Well, here goes nothing. And good-by to him."

The lighted cross had slid beneath his wing. He cut his engine switch and hooked up in a stall. Then, *swish!* the ship fell over into a spin. Tight as a top he corkscrewed down through the rushing blackness, toward Oldemonde three miles below.

And even in that moment he knew it was a doomed and hopeless act. Yet he could not turn back now and see the cold, bitter grin on the lips of Captain Face. He could not endure to hear Face saying, in his high-pitched drawling sneer:

"So you *are* a blasted coward, eh, what, Fahnestock?"

He knew that he was the same as dead. But he had to go through with it. He'd have to fight it out to the end, for the sake of the unknown K-13, if not his own.

The lighted cross rushed up at him in a rapid four-cornered jerk. To his dizzy eyes it began to look like a double cross then.

WITH the altimeter needle sliding below three hundred feet, he straightened out into a wild perpendicular dive. The great black mass of Oldemonde rocked rapidly toward him. Dim lights were flashing on in the windows. A bugle blew with a wild clear note. Suddenly a small brilliant spotlight stabbed at him from the roof.

He was half blinded by the glare. Shadowy men were running below him. The smooth carp pond gleamed with refracted lights. Directly above the center of the illuminated cross he stalled his ship, bow up. The bottom of the air dropped out beneath it. It slapped itself down like a pancake, and went bouncing over a smooth sward toward the black carp pond beyond.

He sank down in his seat as the ship rolled to a stop, all but exhausted. A landing at night is no cure for nervous prostration. The spotlight still blazed at him. He faced it, chewing vigorously. Men came splashing through the shallows of the water, and pounding over the grass.

"You are cofered!" said a sharp voice in English. "Do not mofe!"

He stood up with a lazy grin, holding his arms high, blinking against the light.

"Grapsen das Englischen Schwein!"

He caught a glimpse of the man who was shouting, a gaunt bony-faced sergeant with eye sockets like a skull's. The shadowy men rushed him on all sides, grunting and yelling. They tore him out of the cockpit and hurled him to the ground, beating him about the face and kicking him unmercifully, though he was making no resistance.

"Verdammte Engländer! Lass mir 'n schlachten!"

Good God, the pack of them! Boots and fists! All of them shrieking and mauling and hitting. Probably none of them had ever had a chance to take a wallop at an Englishman before. The thought flashed to him that staff soldiers, like women and preachers and other noncombatants, are apt to be filled with more murderous hate and virulent patriotism and sheer downright yelling hellishness than is ever felt by real fighting men. The most ferocious hang-the-Kaiser boys that Dick had ever met on his own side were the brass hats safely billeted in London or well behind the lines. And it seemed to be the same way with the Fritzes.

Big Dick Fahnestock was good-natured, and mighty hard to hurt. But it annoyed him when they kneed him in the groin and tried to gouge out his eyes.

"If you brass hats want a fight, you'll have it!" he yelled. "Button back your ears, 'cause here I come!"

He rolled and swung like a wildcat, smashing out with his mighty fists. They landed on those German maps like bricks. He half struggled to his feet, hurling them to right and left away from him.

"Gerade der Schnautze!" he bellowed in triumph. "Straight to the snout!" He banged the bony-faced sergeant on the most sensitive part of his nose. *"Plautz auf dem Küsser*—smack on the kisser!" he whooped, dynamiting a handful of teeth from the mouth of a ferocious blond Superman.

But there were too many of them. They were rushing up all the time and piling onto him. He couldn't fight the whole damned German Army.

IN AN instant an officer came running up. He was a lithe, dark-haired man, a lieutentant of the Guards, Dick surmised by his markings. Dick was lying on his back then, resting, with his teeth firmly clenched in a Bavarian ear and his hands locked about the windpipes of a couple of Pomeranian corporals.

"What is it, Wolf?" the officer said in a sharp, clear voice.

"We've captured the enemy, Leutnant von Reuter," moaned the gaunt, black-eyed sergeant, holding his bleeding nose.

Lieutenant Ritter von Reuter stood slapping a swagger stick against his thigh, like an angry cat lashing its tail. At a sharp command from him the German soldiers hoisted Dick to his feet. They held his arms twisted firmly behind him, however, and particularly his ponderous hard fists.

"Namen und Rang?" said von Reuter slowly, staring at Dick closely as he spoke. "Name and rank? I do not speak English. Do you understand me?"

"Ich bin Deutscher," Dick said. *"Deutscher Amerikaner."*

"Späher?"

"Nein, nicht Späher—Fahnenflüchtiger."

"Ah, a deserter," said von Reuter, eyeing him ironically. "You will have the opportunity of proving that to our complete satisfaction, Herr——?"

"Fahnestock."

"Fahnestock der Fahnenflüchtiger," said von Reuter with a curving grin. "Flagpole the Flag-Fugitive. Neat, not so? Too neat to suit me. If you are an English spy, Mr. Fahnestock, by the God above me your uniform won't protect you! We have had enough of spies around here."

Dick felt his face flooding with a guilty heat. The eyes of the young Prussian were merciless as steel. They were about the coolest and most penetrating thing that Dick had ever run against.

"Take this fellow, Sergeant Wolf, and give him double irons! Hold him incommunicado."

"I have papers—" Dick began, fumbling at his breast.

"Papers of what sort?"

"Papers to prove——"

"To prove you are a deserter?" said von Reuter. "That is good! That is rich! Maybe K-13 gave them to you, eh, to help you fool us?"

He narrowed his arched black brows at Dick.

"I don't know who you mean," mumbled Dick.

But he had never been a good liar.

"Give me those papers!

"For Colonel von Kleinhals only, or the general himself."

"I am Colonel von Kleinhals' aide. Obey me instantly when I give you an order, or I will have you flogged!"

"Why, you damned little pup!" yelled Dick.

Only it didn't sound even so nice as that in German.

He saw red. He lunged and wrestled to get at that monocled, insolent young fop. What he had been afraid of had happened. He had lost his temper in a fierce fighting rage. But the soldiers had him in a firm grip. They twisted up his wrists behind his back and wrapped their arms about his knees.

Von Reuter stood watching him with a cool smile, polishing his monocle

"A fighter, eh?" he said. "You will apologize on your knees to me for those words, Leutnant Fahnestock, or I will have your heart. On your knees!"

"I'll see you cooking in hell first!" breathed Dick.

"Extraordinary language," yawned von Reuter, poking his monocle into his eye. "Wolf, relieve this boisterous fool of his papers. Let him eat iron for a while."

Other officers were coming up, plodding over the thick black sod around the edge of the carp pond. Most of them seemed to be bigger and fatter and more important personages than the young lieutenant of Guards. At one time Dick could count not less than four major-generals all together, in addition to brigade, regimental and company commanders enough to load two box cars. He hadn't realized quite what a buzzing rattlesnake nest he had stepped into.

A grave, middle-aged officer, as tall as Dick himself, with a flaming red beard and a bandaged head, shouldered his way forward.

"I am Colonel the Count Von Kleinhals," he said in excellent English, "the Chief of Communications. I will see that you are not mistreated."

Quickly he ran through the packet of papers which Captain Face had given Dick.

"We will see the general at once," he said.

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL Paul von Schmee sat in striped silk pajamas behind his huge desk of carved Flemish oak. His little eyes were bloodshot and furious, and still heavy lidded with sleep. The midnight was striking as Dick Fahnestock was pushed into his presence. Someone poked an elbow into Dick's flank.

"Salute!"

Dick twisted in the grasp of his captors, and glared at von Reuter behind him. The smooth-cheeked young Prussian jabbed him curtly again.

"Salute His Excellency, Englishman!"

"Go take a flying leap at the moon!" growled Dick.

"*Ach*, is it so?" von Reuter hissed in his ear. "You are no deserter. You are a spy. Your heart is with the enemy. Salute His Excellency!"

The huge black-bearded man in pajamas that didn't quite meet around his middle looked more like a Turkish bath rubber than an Excellency to Dick. There was something Oriental in the look of von Schmee, with his flat nose, his flat cheekbones, his small gleaming eyes. He might have passed for a modern reincarnation of Genghis Khan, the scourge of nations, sitting at midnight in his Tatar tents, greasy with fat and half naked, plotting his bloody victories.

Colonel von Kleinhals leaned over and whispered in the general's ear.

"Confidential, from Number Two!" Von Schmee nodded imperceptibly. He waved a big black-haired hand.

"You will retire, gentlemen," he said.

In a moment the room was cleared of his crowding aides, division officers and sentries, with the exception of Kleinhals and the young Prussian Guardsman. Dick stood before the general. In a corner of the vast room a yellow haired, green eyed woman sat curled up in an easy chair, wrapped in a pink silk dressing gown. She put a finger in a book she was reading and watched Dick curiously.

"Salute, Englishman!"

Von Schmee folded his paws over his gaudily clad stomach. He stared at Dick with those sharp, scheming eyes. The skin on his shaven head was corrugated with thought. Whatever indictments might be read against his appearance and his morals, Paul Friedrich Hermann von Schmee was a bold, fierce, sagacious man. The brain beneath his naked skull was large. It was ruthless and very cunning. A man does not become commander of six divisions of Prussian shock troops by being a fool.

"He says his name is Fahnestock, Excellency," explained von Reuter. "By nationality, American. By rank, a sub-lieutenant of the British Flying Corps. He claims to be a deserter."

Von Schmee ran through the papers which had been handed him by Kleinhals.

"Your story, Englishman?" he said.

Dick moved his quid to a corner of his mouth. More and more he was becoming oppressed with the gravity of his situation. It was a fatal enterprise he had so rashly embarked on. Yet he must bluff it out as long as he could. He leaned his knuckles on von Schmee's desk, and spoke the lesson he had learned.

"I am German-American," he said. "My mother came from Berlin. My father's people were Hamburg men. I enlisted with the English because I like to fight. But the English didn't treat me right. I got to thinking you fellows were the fellows I ought to be with. Tonight I broke loose. I cracked the headquarters safe and rifled it of some papers that I thought might be useful to you—us—the Germans. I got into the air and kept on flying till I saw this hospital cross. Then I came down."

"His story has the ring of sincerity, sir," said Colonel von Kleinhals. "We can check it up, of course, by Number Two."

"Do you know our operative, Number Two?" said von Schmee.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure," said Dick.

"Do you know the English spy, K-13?" put in von Kleinhals quickly.

"No, *sir!*" said Dick.

He stared at Kleinhals with honest brown eyes. He was glad to be able to speak the truth for a change.

Von Schmee sorted over the papers.

"These appear," he said, "to give a detailed disposition of the enemy forces confronting us. I may assume they are duplicates of the reports transmitted to us this afternoon by Number Two, and lost by blundering stupidity. If so, this Englishman has rendered us an incalculable service. In forty-eight hours we shall cut the English line like a piece of rotten string. I will examine these reports thoroughly. It is good."

He rubbed his hands. His small red eyes lingered on Dick almost with a look of affection.

"Decode this report of Number Two," he said.

He handed papers to von Reuter. The Prussian, clicking his heels and bowing, sat down at a big code book. Von Schmee pulled his beard, continuing to survey Dick curiously.

"From America, eh?" said Colonel von Kleinhals. "My wife is an American. She came from Milwaukee. Her name was Bertha Schmalz. You must have heard of her?"

"No, sir," said Dick.

The colonel showed his disappointment.

"The Schmalzes are one of the first families of America, I have been led to understand," he said.

"I come from Missouri," explained Dick.

"Oh! I thought you were an American."

Dick chewed quietly. So far, not so bad. Only the stormy eyed young Prussian seemed to have suspected him. Von Kleinhals was actually friendly. The green eyed woman in the corner had resumed the reading of her book.

"How is the morale in the English flying service?" asked Kleinhals.

"Well," said Dick guardedly, "all the boys seem sure they're going to win. It doesn't do much good trying to argue them out of it, either."

Von Kleinhals shook his red head.

"The English air force is bad, very bad," he said. "They act like crazy men. There is no discipline, no orderliness, in their way of fighting. They are giving us much trouble. For instance, single ships of them diving headlong into our squadron formations. It is not scientific warfare. We have lost many ships that way by surprise."

"It's hard to get them to fight scientific in the air," said Dick. "Most of them just mix in and blaze away whenever they see some Jerries—Germans. I suppose something ought to be done to teach 'em better."

"Warfare is a science, not a football game," said Kleinhals, waggling his crimson beard. "That is the trouble with the English. They can never be serious. They have not German *Gründlichkeit, Vollständigkeit und Regelmässigkeit.*"

"No, sir," said Dick respectfully. "And the joke of it is the poor boobs don't even know what they're missing."

"That is it," said Colonel von Kleinhals, lifting a finger. "How can you deal with men who will not act according to any rules? It is absolutely bad military tactics to engage in battle against superior forces, as is well known. Therefore we send up our airmen in scientific formations. But the English spoil it all, because of this very pernicious habit of attacking single-handed. They can find no justification in Clausewitz's nor von Bernardi's treatises on the art of war, for such tactics. I can likewise cite Cæsar's "De Bellis Gallicis" against them. They simply have not a leg to stand on."

"You said a mouthful, Colonel," declared Big Dick. "I'd like to see you having a debate with 'em sometime. I'll bet you would argue them all over the lot and then some."

"There is one English flier who exemplifies this unscientific trait to the extreme," said Kleinhals. "A report is at hand of how this afternoon he attacked four of our combat ships ten miles within our own lines, sending one down in flames, and breaking up the formation so that the remainder had to beat an orderly retreat. Is that science? Is that sound military practice? No. Furthermore, this same crazy man has performed identical tactics innumerable times before. Our pilots refuse to meet him on such unscientific grounds. They laugh at him. He has made himself ridiculous. They call him the jackass, because of a picture of that animal which he is accustomed to have painted on the ships he flies."

"It ain't a jackass, it's a mule," said Dick.

"Ah, you know him, said Kleinhals.

"I've heard of him," said Dick. "His name is Big."

"What a fool!" said Kleinhals.

General von Schmee scratched his hairy stomach. His sharp eyes had not left Dick's face.

"What are you eating?" he demanded.

"Old Horse Plug," said Dick.

"Vot iss dat?" said the general in English.

"*Dünger,*" said Dick.

The yellow haired lady with the book looked up at the sound of the few English words which had been spoken. She patted a pretty yawn.

"Will you translate, Paul?" she asked the general.

"It iss not bolite," said the general firmly.

She arose and strolled over to him, stretching herself like a cat that arches its back. Her book she dropped on the floor. It was a copy of H. G. Wells' "Mr. Britling Sees It Through," a popular English war novel of the day.

She perched on the arm of the general's chair. He patted her little knee. She rumpled his bristly beard with an absent-minded gesture. Yet all the time her eyes, Dick noted, her pale eyes that were as green as ice and as cold as phosphorescent glow, were on the handsome young Guards officer who sat with head bent in oblivious concentration, decoding the message.

"Have you finished, Herr von Reuter?" demanded von Schmee.

Von Reuter laid down his pencil. He arose slowly, standing at stiff attention. His stormy blue eyes flashed on Dick and then on Vrow Alys Dervanter.

"Read," said von Schmee.

"Confidential," muttered von Reuter, quirking a penciled eyebrow.

"This fool understands no German," said von Schmee, with a fond arm around Vrow Alys. "And the Englishman—will have no opportunity to make use of what he hears in this presence. Read. My eyes are tired."

"To the end, Excellency?"

"To the end!"

"*Zu Befehl!*"

Ritter von Reuter bowed from the hips. He put his monocle to his eye.

"From Number Two," he said. "As follows——"

He read the decoded message in a quick, clear voice. A smile was quirking at the corners of his smooth curved lips, a smile as smooth as red satin.

"EXCELLENCY:

> "I beg to submit further details on the strength and positions of the British artillery. Also duplicates of the valuable reports entrusted to Colonel the Count von Kleinhals at Oldemonde this afternoon. This provides you with an analysis exact and complete. As will be evident to Your Excellency's eye when you have digested these reports, the British line, attentuated by French withdrawals toward the Verdun sector, offers three certain points for a complete piercing through.
>
> "The English have acquired knowledge that Number Two is operating with their air forces. I credit the phenomenal cunning of the English K-13 for this disclosure. While no suspicion has been directed toward myself, I have deemed it advisable to create a decoy. This decoy I have established in the person of one Richard W. Fahnestock, sub-lieutenant, R. F. C., who has been inflicting atrocious destruction on our own brave and devoted airmen. I regard the obliteration of the said Fahnestock as equal to the wiping out of an average enemy squadron.
>
> "Said Fahnestock being of German descent and American birth, I have endeavored to implant in both officers and men of the enemy a presupposition that he is one of us. I have induced said Fahnestock to flee to Your Excellency's command with every appearance of desertion. The activity of the enemy Intelligence will therefore be centered on said Fahnestock, insuring my own position.
>
> "With all emphasis I beg you, Gracious Excellency, to run down and destroy without delay——"

The reader cleared his throat and looked up.

"'Without delay' is understood, Excellency," he said.

"Read on!"

Von Reuter read on.

> "Destroy without delay the English K-13. It is of the utmost imperativeness—*äusserst Befehlendkeit*. Information of highest authenticity has reached me that K-13 is operating at Your Excellency's own headquarters. I yet lack any clue to his identity, but am close upon the source. I trust to be able to transmit to Your Excellency a complete description of this most dangerous spy before the lapse of another twenty-four hours.
>
> "When dealing with K-13, however, as I do not need to warn Your Excellency, twenty-four hours is enough to cause us incalculable destruction. Respectfully I beg and implore Your Excellency neither to sleep nor to let any person whatsoever who may be around you——"

Lieutenant von Reuter coughed huskily into his handkerchief.

"A drink of water, please," he said.

Vrow Alys Dervanter jumped up like a frightened bird. She had apparently interpreted the simple German words. If not, she had read the desire expressed in that handsome face on which her eyes languished.

"I will bring you a drink off water," she said.

"Was sagt sie?" demanded von Reuter, watching her with narrowed eyes and head aslant.

"Sie sagt, sie wird ein Trank Wasser bringen," translated General von Schmee, with the ponderous pride of a bilingualist.

Von Reuter examined his script again. "'Any person whatsoever who may be around you' is heavily underscored, Excellency," he said in a lowered voice. "It would seem to indicate——"

"I am not a fool," growled von Schmee. "Read on!"

> "Neither sleep nor allow any person whatsoever who may be around you to make a move unknown to you before K-13 is unescapably in your fist. For the ferreting out of K-13's identity I beg to suggest to Your Gracious Excellency that this American fool, said Fahnestock, may be serviceably utilized. He has been charged by me to make himself known as an English spy to K-13, and if carefully watched, yet left apparently unsuspected, may succeed in making a contact which will betray——"

"Read no more!" said General von Schmee.

Lieutenant von Reuter sipped a water tumbler which Vrow Alys had brought him. He bowed his thanks stiffly and disentangled his fingers from her hand, which was wound still around the glass.

"There is no more to read, sir," he said. "'Will betray the damned English spy to us'. Signed, 'Number Two'."

He handed the code original and the translation to the general with a flourish. And his red satin smile was like the smile of angels as he glanced mockingly at Big Dick.

Big Dick Fahnestock leaned heavily on his fists. He stood staring at the little crimson flame of von Schmee's eyes. The room rocked and reeled about him. He could see nothing else. Von Schmee stacked all the papers together quickly and thrust them into his safe. He pressed a buzzer.

"It's a double cross!" Dick mouthed hoarsely. "All that this little squirt here has read is lies! He doesn't like me, and he's made it up! I tell you, I'm a damned deserter! I busted open the squadron safe, and grabbed those papers from it, and hopped away! You can ask 'em all if I didn't crack the safe, and knock old Fairy Face for a loop——"

"Who?" said von Schmee.

"Captain Tillinghast Wainwright Oakley Face, R. F. C.!" yelled Dick.

"The initials, again?" said von Schmee.

Dick opened up his mouth and screeched. It was a big mouth, and a big screech.

"Captain T. W. O. Face!" he bellowed.

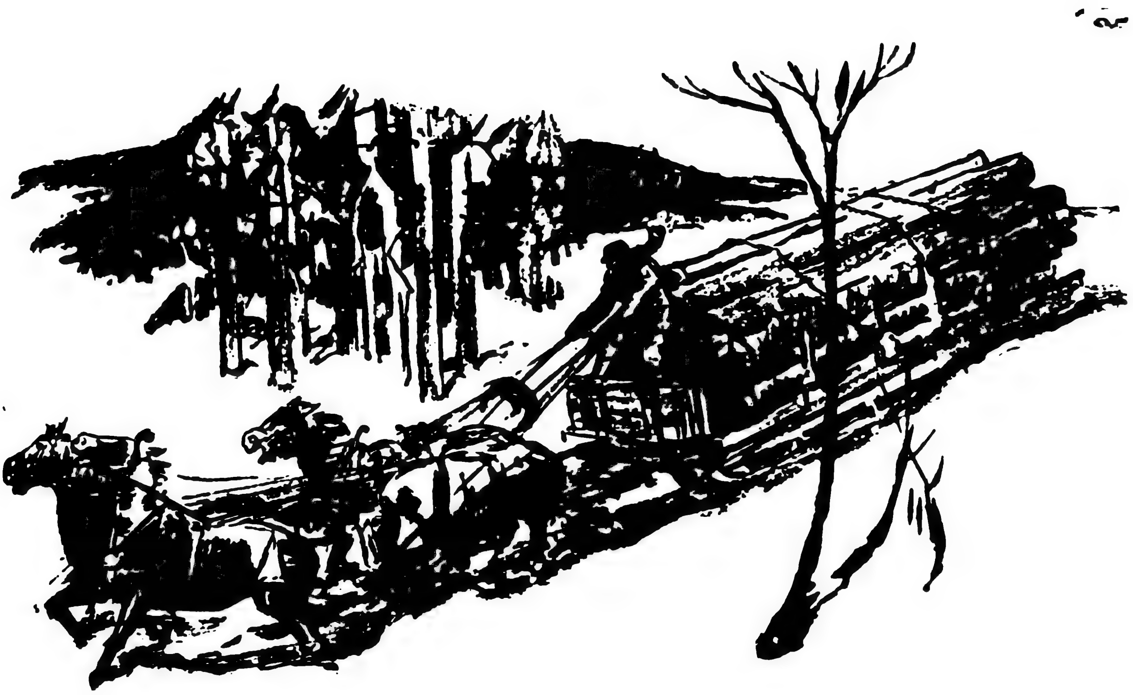
Then a great light hit him on the head like a falling mountain. He leaned against the desk edge heavily. In the profound silence his ears roared. But not so loudly that they drowned out the mocking sound of Lieutenant von Reuter's sudden, wild uncontrollable laughter.

Dick snatched up a wine bottle then, and surged over the desk at von Schmee. But the sentries who had come in response to von Schmee's buzzer signal had him about the arms and body. He hurled the wine bottle, and von Schmee dropped down behind the desk. He fought with fists and knees, with his head, with any missile he could snatch up. Rifle butts were crashing at his face. He heard Vrow Alys Dervanter screaming in all the dialects of the Low Countries. He fought on, and they downed him.

"Hock the Kaiser!" he croaked. "Two bits for the whole Hun army! Come on, the rest of you—"

He was on the floor now, beneath the boots and the rifle butts. Still the woman was screaming. It was a bloody business before they'd got him.

Big Dick Fahnestock, confined and summarily sentenced to die, finally meets the elusive K-13 in the darkness before the dawn of his execution. In the next issue Joel Rogers narrates the thrilling events which followed that dramatic rendezvous.



ROAD MONKEYS

A Tense Story of the Logging Camps

By JOHN BEAMES

PINCHER was engaged in the congenial task of rubbing Dutchy's nose in the snow, after his usual brutal custom when his temper was out of gear.

The pair were road monkeys on the steep hill above the landing on Sturgeon Lake. It was their business to keep the huge sleighs, with their fourteen-foot bunks piled a dozen feet high with logs, from running over the teams that drew them and going to wreck at the bottom. They kept a fire burning in a pit by the side of the road, and accompanied each load from the top of the hill, one on each side, checking its way as occasion required by throwing hot sand in the deep ruts in which the runners slid. Between loads, they kept the road clean, the ruts well cut and even, and the sharp turn at the bottom of the hill well banked.

It was an easy and simple job, but the only one for which they were fitted. Dutchy was small and slight for his eighteen years, timid and shrinking, but willing and conscientious.

He dwelt among the crew of turbulent, unwashed, illiterate, primitive lumberjacks like a lamb among wolves. But the analogy does not quite hold good, for a lamb will not long continue to dwell among wolves for obvious reasons. But only one man among the gang illtreated Dutchy. Your lumberjack is primitive, but he is a sportsman and he does not oppress the weak. He can even show extraordinary gentleness towards them.

Dutchy moved peacefully then, though warily, among the occasional wild riots that turned the big log bunkhouse into a bedlam. He suffered indeed; but from omnipresent vermin, physical uncleanness and aching loneliness, for a good home had been his. It was only out on the windswept hillside above the lake that he encountered physical violence.

For Pincher was that most hideous kind of a brute, a cruel brute. He had been one of the toughest in his day, but a life of bestial debauchery had ruined his once magnificent constitution, and a kick from a vicious mule he was maltreating had lamed him permanently; soured him, too.

Now he was bent, and he limped; his hands had been broken in many a barroom brawl; most of his teeth were gone and the rest black stumps; upon his sunken cheeks his once flaming whiskers had faded to a dirty yellow; and his red rimmed eyes looked out bleared and malignant upon a world in which he found nothing good.

Road-monkeying is the last job to which wornout lumberjacks sink; it is for them the antechamber to the grave. Comparing his squalid present with his lurid and furious past, Pincher had come to hate all mankind. Dutchy, being the nearest thing to hand and about the only person he had strength and courage enough left to beat, became the victim of his grudge against life.

He had had a bad night with toothache and came to work in the frozen dawn suffering under a sense of cosmic injustice. The boy, being venomously sworn at, botched the job of fire making, and Pincher, glad of the excuse, took him by the throat, choked him, clouted him, flung him down, and was rubbing his face in the snow when Tige Bentley, hurrying late to work, saw him.

Tige was a young man of swift and decisive action. Forthwith he applied the toe of his heavy rubber boot to that part of Pincher's anatomy uppermost at the moment, and the bully involuntarily buried his face in the snow alongside his victim's.

He came to his feet spitting snow and obscenity, while Dutchy made haste to roll out of reach. Tige surveyed the foaming road monkey with a grin, but there was a frosty gleam in his eye. As there were a hundred and sixty odd pounds of him, all bone and wire-drawn muscle, Pincher refrained from bodily assault, but he turned loose a scorching tongue.

" 'S'all right," said Tige, nodding amiably. "You're gettin' along to be a old man, Pincher, an' so I won't paste you for the things you're a-sayin'. But I'm goin' to warn you here an' now that if I see or hear tell of you mishandlin' that there poor kid again, why when I get through you'll spit through your left ear an' wipe your nose on your heel. Talk to him all you want if it helps any, but keep your dirty glaums off of him, savvy?"

He turned short on his heel and swaggered off, canthook clinking musically on shoulder and scarlet tuque perched rakishly over one ear. Dutchy gazed after him with grateful eyes, but Pincher cursed him in a voice cracked with fury and hatred. Cursed him until suddenly he clutched at his heart and reeled back against a stump, fighting for breath with blue lips and starting eyes.

Then he began to whimper.

"He knows I got a bum heart. He knows damn well I'm liable to drop down dead any minute. He knows it. He wouldn't dast lay a finger on me if he didn't. I'd, I'd . . . ."

Words failed him again, and he gasped and fought for breath in such hideous paroxysms of agony that Dutchy for a moment thought that he would actually drop dead.

But the attack passed. Pincher, shivering and muttering, crept into the sandpit and crouched over the fire, a repulsive object. His sheepskin jacket was tattered and filthy; the lugs of his mangy fur cap hung down on either side of his face, revealing only his broken and twisted nose and the working tuft of tobacco stained beard on his chin; his crippled hairy hands, black with dirt, outstretched to the blaze, shook and trembled. The boy gazed at him with horror and loathing.

At intervals throughout the day he burst forth into imprecations against Tige and querulous, whining complaints of his own physical ailments.

"You know what I'd like to do?" he said, blinking malevolently and making a champing motion with his jaws. "I'd like to have on a pair of good caulked boots—long, sharp heel caulks to 'em—an' get him down an' put my foot on his face an' swing around. Yes, swing clear around! That'd fix him. He wouldn't be so fresh then."

He narrated at length a ghastly tale of how he had once served a man so in a fight, gloating fiendishly over the horrible disfigurement that had ensued. Soon, though, he returned to the subject of Tige and elaborated upon the tortures he longed to inflict upon him. A demoniac light came into his eyes; he clawed the air with twisted fingers, and showed all his rotting fangs in a ferocious grin.

The premonitory symptoms of another heart attack put a sudden end to his invective, just as Dutchy was beginning to feel that he must fly from the place in horror.

Next day he was quieter, though at intervals his jaws moved, and the boy caught fragmentary mutterings.

"Just wait . . . I'll fix him . . . I'll fix him yet . . . His time's comin', his time's comin' . . . I'll fix him."

Day by day he repeated his disjointed sentences until it was evident to the listening, shrinking boy that the desire for revenge had supplanted every other thought in the man's diseased brain.

He drew Tige aside one evening. . .

"Watch out for Pincher," he besought him earnestly. "He's off his nut. He ain't only just mad at you, he's plumb crazy. Watch out for him, Tige."

Tige laughed.

"Huh! Watch out for that old mossback? I'd need to be scared of anything he could do, wouldn't I? Don't fret about that, kid. I can take care of myself. But, say, if he ever uses you bad again, you let me know an' he'll be a sorry old coon when I get done playin' with him."

BUT the boy was made the victim of no more acts of tyranny. Pincher seemed almost to have forgotten him, merely snarling mutely at intervals upon becoming aware of his presence. All his grudge against existence, all his sorrow over his own departed strength, all his regrets for the bestial pleasures he could no longer enjoy, all the poison in his decaying body and failing brain, met and joined in one cancerous hatred against Tige Bentley.

Insanity was the inevitable outcome of his physical condition, but it was mere chance that his monomania took the form it did. Tige in his youth and strength represented all that he mourned and had lost forever, and in destroying Tige he would, in a measure, obtain his revenge against life.

But the season drew on and no opportunity arose for the satisfaction of his desire. Tige had long dismissed the whole affair from his irresponsible mind. He had a kindly word for the boy when they met, which was seldom, and a warning grin for Pincher on their rare encounters; for the rest, when he was not at work, he was skylarking or organizing stag dances and singsongs.

The break-up approached and, in order to get the logs out before the big thaw, day and night loading gangs were put on. Nearly every hour of the long day saw one of the big sleighs groaning and grinding down the steep hill.

Pincher and Dutchy remained on the day shift and a couple of elderly men were put on at night. Then one evening it came on to blow strongly from the east and presently the air was thick with the damp snowflakes of spring. Caution dictated that loading be suspended for the night, for the sleighs could not be held on the slippery new snow on the hill. But there was half a million board feet of timber still to come out, and Harry Boland, "the push," decided to carry on.

Pincher and Dutchy were already in their bunks when the order came to go back to the sandpit. The boy, though tired, responded with cheerful alacrity, but his mate stumbled out into the blizzard snarling and cursing. The storm had lulled a little by the time they reached the hill, and by the use of plenty of hot sand they brought one load down without much trouble. But thereafter the wind freshened, and the next went down like a plummet, only escaping wreck at the turn by a miracle.

It was once more the turn of the first teamster, old white headed Sol Squires. Sol had just seen the other sleigh whirl past him like an avalanche and he was in a thoughtful mood.

The loading gang, working by the light of big flares, had nearly completed an imposing load, intending it to be the last before midnight. Though the wind roared in the treetops overhead, they themselves worked in a calm into which the snowflakes floated softly.

Sol slowly unhooked his team from the empty sleigh and moved over to the load. Then he stopped and caressed his chin, measuring the towering bulk with his eye. He shook his head.

"Boys," he said in his high pitched nasal drawl, "I'm a old man now an' maybe ain't got so long to live, but I figure to live all of it. I ain't goin' to be shot into hell on no load of logs before I'm sent for. Here's where some young lad with more pluck than brains gets a fine chanct to bust his neck, because I just p'intedly ain't agoin' to take that outfit down no hill."

The push, who in his anxiety had been personally superintending the loading, heard him and called out with a forced laugh:

"What's that you say, Sol?"

Sol repeated his words deliberately with additional profane embellishments.

The severe etiquette of the woods demands that a push shall not lose his temper or speak harshly to any man, and Harry Boland was one of the very best. That his most trusted teamster should desert him at such a critical time was a severe blow. For a moment his mouth contracted angrily, and then he replied in even tones:

"Well, just as you say, Sol. Of course I'll have to give your team to someone else. I can't use a man that won't take a chance. You can hit back to camp now an' call in on the clerk for your time in the mornin'."

"Suits me," said the unrepentant Sol and tramped away.

"Any of your lads willin' to take a sag at her?" asked Boland.

Now Tige, tailing down for the gang, had long cherished an ambition to drive a logging team, for the skinners of the big sleighs are among the aristocracy of the tall timber. He flipped his canthook into a log, therefore, and stood forward grinning.

"Guess, as old Sol says, I got more pluck'n brains," he said. "But I'm willin' an' anxious to hit the pike with her."

"Ever done any skinnin'?" queried Boland.

"Quite a few one way an' another. Not as I ever handled a set of log sleighs before. But I guess all a feller's got to do tonight, is to hang tight an' trust to luck."

"It's about that," admitted Boland. "Well, anyway, we got to get the stuff out if we do kill a few, so away you go an' good luck to you."

IN THE deep woods the snow fell evenly and softly, but out on the bare hillside above the lake it danced and whirled in choking clouds before a wind that howled like a pack of wolves. It filled the eyes and stung like needles on the bare flesh. The road gang were hard at work. Ole, the crook necked Swede, Old Billy Martin, his hands crippled with rheumatism, Pincher and Dutchy, were strung out at intervals down the hill, sweeping, sweeping, sweeping. But it was like trying to sweep back the tide; the ruts filled level again behind each stroke of the brooms.

Sol Squires came blundering through the smother on his way back to camp.

"Hello," said Pincher, peering. "Thought you was taking the next load?"

"Not any," grunted Sol. "That dern young fool, Tige Bentley, wants to go to hell before he's sent for. He's welcome for me." The darkness swallowed him.

Dutchy was paying little attention to anything but the work in hand, but the mention of Tige's name brought his head up with a jerk. He shot an anxious glance at Pincher, who dropped his broom and bent over to pick it up.

He was a long while doing it, and when he rose it was to spout peremptory commands.

"Hey you, Ole, get up the hill with your lantern. The load'll be along any minute. Martin, get your shovel. Go up the road a piece on the other side an' stand by to check her when she comes. Where's that damn boy? Hey there, get down the hill an' sweep the ruts at the bend. Get a wiggle on. Don't be standin' there gawpin'."

The boy went slowly and reluctantly. He could not understand the new disposition. It would have been better strategy for the whole four, by united effort on the steepest part of the hill, to bring the load almost to a standstill, when it would have a more than even chance of negotiating the turn in safety. But now Ole was being sent where he could do no good whatever, and he himself where he could do little more.

Why had Pincher arranged to be left alone at the most critical point on the whole hill, where he could do what he would unobserved? Did he intend deliberately to wreck the sleigh? The fiendishness of the thing was almost beyond belief. But was anything beyond Pincher?

The boy was in a pitiable condition of indecision. He was constitutionally timid and he was terrified of Pincher. He had been ordered to sweep the ruts at the bend. Suppose Pincher did his part in checking the downward rush of the load, and it went to disaster on the snow choked ruts at the turn, would he not himself be the direct agent of Tige's death?

He had reached the bottom of the hill by this time. Suppose Pincher failed, or deliberately neglected, to do his duty and the load was out of control when it reached the bottom of the hill? In that event all the sweeping in the world would not hold the runners in the ruts.

"*Hi-yi-yi-yi-i-i!*"

Thin and faint and far away there came to his agonized ears the shrill warning ululation of a logging teamster about to descend the hill.

Tige was coming! Something had to be done at once. Without any clear idea of what it would be, the boy turned and labored up the slope again as fast as the wet and sticky snow would permit him.

Pincher came into view, a shovel poised in his hands. The glare of the fire in the pit behind threw him into high relief and turned the snowflakes that whirled about him into so many drops of blood. He stood bent forward in an attitude of tense ferocity, a grim and sinister figure.

Further up the hill, on the other side of the road, was a vague blur that Dutchy knew to be Old Billy Martin. Beyond him again, high up like a star, was a winking yellow spark that began suddenly to oscillate violently in swift descent. A strident howl rode down the gale. It was Ole, the crook necked Swede, with his lantern. And behind him there grew out of the gloom a vast inky blot; and that was the load, already coming at a dangerous speed.

With a last yell, Ole leaped sideways out of its path. Into the crimson glare of the fire swept the great bay team, eyes shining, mouths open, haunches tucked under them. High up aloft, perched on the summit of the load, knelt Tige, his face as white as the snow that beat upon him. With the reins twined about his wrists and his body braced, he held back with all his might.

Martin swung his shovel in a steady sweep that laid the hot sand evenly down the rut for a good ten feet. The ponderous mass checked, and out behind the screaming runners gushed a spout of crimson flame.

It was Pincher's turn. The load had lost much of its momentum, and another strip of sand would enable the struggling horses to regain their feet. But Pincher laughed, a dry, hoarse, malignant cackle. Deliberately, before the eyes of Tige and the boy, he tossed the contents of his shovel over his shoulder into the snow behind.

Dutchy stood physically paralyzed, though his brain worked with lightning speed. He had a vision of the sleigh hurtling irresistibly down the hill, striking the bend, sweeping the horses off their feet and plunging straight ahead through the narrow strip of brushwood to the sheer six-foot drop to the ice of the lake.

It had happened already once that winter, before the turn had been properly banked, and the horror of the disaster, which he had witnessed in every detail, was burnt into the boy's soul. He must stop the sleigh or Tige would die.

He *must* stop the load. It was already upon him, looming as big as a house. He had no time to think. He must stop the load somehow. He leaped. By some miracle he landed on the roller just behind the horses. He had retained his hold on his broom. He dropped that in the path of the runners. There was a slight jolt, a sharp crackling, and the sleigh swept on. He threw down his cap, his mittens, but still there was no perceptible slackening of the pace.

In a matter of seconds now they would reach the bend. They were going like the wind in an intense and terrible silence, in utter darkness. Bracing himself against the logs at his back, the boy wriggled out of his sheepskin coat. He flung that, too, under the heels of the now madly galloping team.

The load checked, slowed down. It was the galloping team now that was the menace; once their traces tightened they would bring the whole mass upon themselves and be hurled with it over the drop down to the unyielding ice.

He flung himself upon the drawbolt and wrestled with it. The traces held slack for just that instant of time. They tightened, but the drawbolt was out, and the horses shot away into the darkness. There was a startled cry from aloft and then silence.

He had done all he could. Clinging to the roller he stared into the dizzy darkness ahead and prayed wordlessly. They were at the bottom of the hill. For one flaming instant of joy he thought the sleigh would make the turn. But the snow filled ruts gave no grip to the runners. The pole dipped as the front bob swept straight on over the bank. With a bitter cry of despair Dutchy flung himself sidelong into the snow.

UP BY the fire the three men stood immobile, staring and listening. The load had vanished as though the earth had opened and swallowed it. Ole and Old Billy, unaware of Pincher's act, were straining their ears for the triumphant shout that would announce the safe negotiation of the turn. Pincher, more intent than either, awaited the crash that would inform him his vengeance was accomplished.

A crash and the rolling thunder of falling logs.

"My God, oh, my God," mumbled Old Billy. Ole gave a horrified exclamation in his own tongue. From Pincher there came a sound between a laugh and a scream.

For one petrified instant they stood there, and then Ole sprang away down the hill like a deer, Martin half a pace behind. Pincher hobbled after them as fast as his lame leg would permit.

At the bottom, Ole held high his lantern. There were the deep marks where the runners had cut through the banked snow, ploughed their way through the scrub and plunged over the bank.

"That's the end of him," said Martin, shaking his head sorrowfully.

"Yes, that's the end of him," repeated Pincher with grim satisfaction.

Into the yellow light of the lantern there limped a snow-plastered figure, bare headed, bare handed, coatless and shivering. It was Dutchy, with the tears running down his face.

"You did it, you did it!" he screamed at Pincher. "I seen you. You threw the sand in the snow. I seen you."

"Shut up!" yelled Pincher, frightened and furious. "Shut up, you're crazy."

"I won't shut up. I'm goin' to tell. I want everybody to know. I seen you with my own eyes. I won't shut up," reiterated Dutchy.

"I'll kill you," cried Pincher, "I'll choke the life out of you. I never done nothin'. You're lyin'."

"He ain't lyin', you lousy swine."

Another snow plastered figure appeared in the narrow circle of light cast by the lantern. They recoiled as before a man risen from the dead. It was Tige.

"I'll fix you!" he roared, and flung himself upon the cowering Pincher.

"He's killin' me, he's killin' me! Help, boys, help! A-a-ah . . ." The screaming voice died away in a long gurgle.

Martin and Ole threw themselves upon the frantic Tige and dragged him to his feet. Pincher remained curled up in the snow with his arms wrapped about his head and his knees drawn up.

"Keep him off," he whimpered. "Boys, keep him off. I'm a old man an' I got a bum heart. He'll kill me."

Tige relaxed slowly, and turned away with a sound of disgust.

"You deserve to be killed, damn you! But I'll let the devil have you in his own time."

His eye fell upon Dutchy.

"How in hell did you come to get in that shape?" he demanded with the peevishness of a man whose nerves have been badly shaken.

Stammering hysterically, between laughter and tears, the shivering Dutchy told his story in broken sentences.

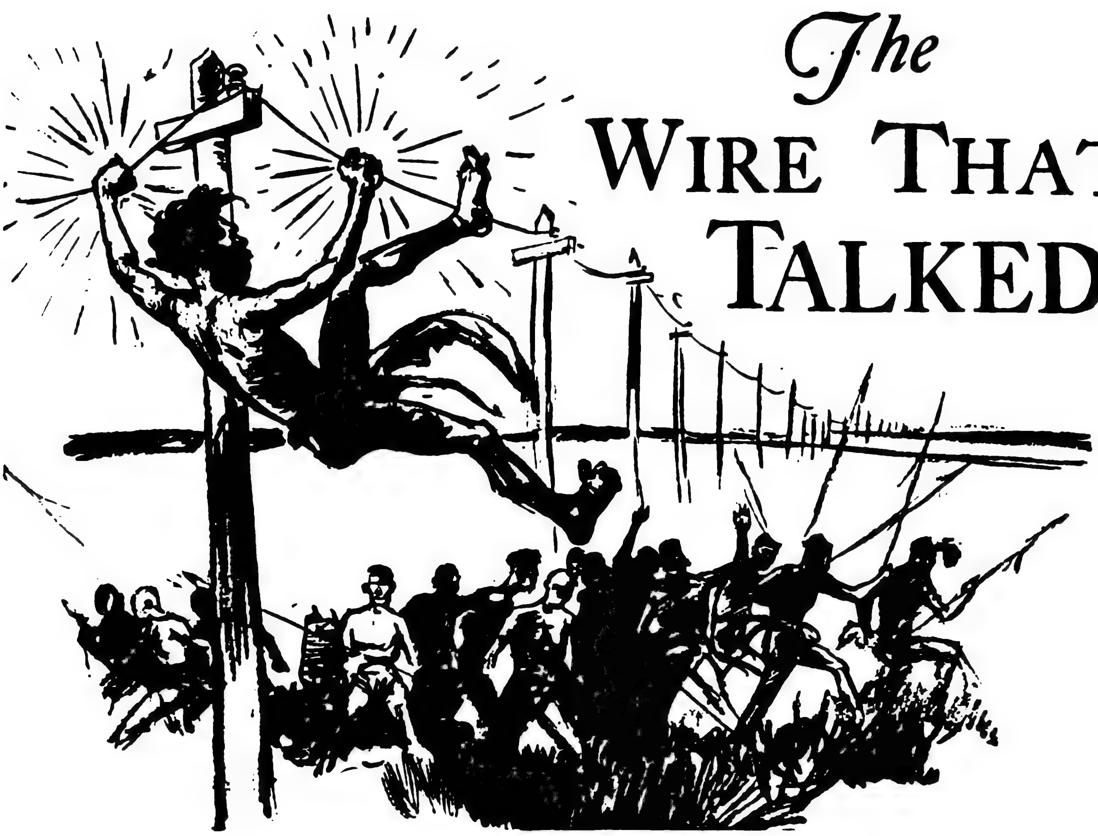
The eyes of the rest fastened upon him, growing wider in amazement. Even Pincher stopped his snuffling whines to listen.

"The hell you did!" said Tige. "Well, I'll be damned! An' you turned the horses loose, eh? Well, kid, I hope it'll be some satisfaction to you to know you saved my life. I had the lines tied around my wrists, an' when the horses run off they just yanked me off my perch into a big snowbank. Not a scratch on me. Only for you pullin' the drawbolt I'd be cold meat right now."

He pulled off his mackinaw jacket.

"Here, put this on. I can't have you shiverin' to death. Seein' that you saved my life, it's about the least I can do for you."

The WIRE THAT TALKED



A Tale of the Never-Never Land

By KELMAN FROST

"IT AIN'T the ordinary pilferin'," growled Bill Burke, shading his bloodshot eyes from the dazzling Australian sun as he glared up at the bare poles. "We're used to the blacks cuttin' off a yard or two fer bangles an' the like, but when it comes to over a ruddy mile vanishin' every blinkin' night—Hell!"

The two mounted members of the Northern Territory Police nodded in sympathy. They guessed how Burke felt. He was the linesman in charge of that section of the Transcontinental Telegraph which runs between Daly Water and Powell's Creek, one of the most arid districts of the drought ridden Never-Never Land.

"Wholesale robbery, eh?" grunted Corporal Jerry Murray, tilting back his wide-awake hat in order to mop the fringe of his sun bleached thatch.

"I reckon so. In seven nights we've lost eight miles o' line, best copper at that. You know what that's worth?"

"Several hundred pounds," murmured Murray, understanding now why he had been sent down country on such an apparently simple job as that of a broken line. "Enough to load down every *gin* in Australia with bracelets."

"Bracelets be damned!" snorted the linesman, squirting tobacco juice with deadly accuracy at a red beetle which had foolishly forsaken the scant shade offered by a small boulder. "There's more to this than bracelets. I'm like to lose me perishin' job, but what can I do? My section's fifty mile long, an' I can't get along the whole o' that every twenty-four hours. If they wants their ruddy line protected they'll have to send me a patrol."

The lean, long faced constable on the roan horse had not spoken until now. He winked at his corporal.

"Guess you'd better apply fer an airplane, sonny!" he drawled.

"Huh!" Burke favored him with a scowl. "If that's all your blasted Yankee brains can think up, you'd best ride back to headquarters an' get some sleep, Rand."

Constable Reggie Rand, who had the distinction of being the only American in the Northern Territory Police, flicked a buzz fly from his mount's twitching ears.

He was not at all abashed by the reception his advice had received.

"Even a flivver'd be better'n that nag you've got tethered over there," he continued.

"Huh! It ain't no jokin' matter. There's somethin' afoot, an' I can't give you no clues. Plenty o' *myall* spoor in the district, but I ain't seen nothin' of 'em. Hide in the swamps, I reckon."

"Yes." The corporal stared reflectively at the trampled state of the ground. "We've never had any trouble with that bunch since I've been in the force. They're a poor, stunted lot, and rotten with fever. They've secret paths across the Polygonum Swamp that only they know, and a crippled chief called Gingin . . . I can't imagine that crowd stealing eight miles of copper wire."

"Well, it's gone!" Burke looked slowly around the blistering void in which he worked day in and day out. There was no sign of life anywhere. No houses, no cattle, not even a bird in the sky. There was just a vast stillness, a terrific heat, and the endless line of telegraph poles running north and south, with here and there a stray patch of salt bush to help a man preserve sanity by causing his eyes to linger. "Communication's been down fer four days, an' there'll be hell to pay before we're finished."

Constable Rand turned to his burly companion. Murray was old in the service, and case-hardened. He did not know the meaning of the word hurry. For ten years the Never-Never Land had been his beat, a beat like none other in this world, policed by no more than fifty men, six of whom are stationed at Darwin. Imagination was not the corporal's strong point. Superintending cattle movements, protecting the natives against themselves and the sellers of bad gin, preventing *poddy-dodging*, which is the picturesque name given to cattle thieving, and carrying out the thousand and one trivial routine tasks of the service, had been Murray's lot ever since he had come out from England as a young man.

Rand, little more than a *jackaroo* in the corporal's eyes, had served five years with the Texas Rangers before a certain little lady down at San Antonio had decided to make some other man's life worth living. Rand had resolved to seek solace in distant parts, and now here he was regarding the bared poles with unwinking gray eyes.

"They've got a small power plant up at Daly, haven't they?"

"Yes, just a gas engine and a dynamo for lighting the station. MacDougal installed that . . . Why?"

Rand told them of his idea, whereupon they thumped his back and chuckled with mirth until the frettish roan kicked viciously at the linesman who brought the full force of his extensive vocabulary down upon the horse and her rider.

But even Burke could not forget the great idea for long.

"It's a dinkum scheme," he grinned. "I'll tap in an' tell 'em at Daly's. Meanwhile what are you two goin' to do?"

Corporal Murray shook his reins.

"Leave that to us. Carry on just as usual. Don't make it look as though anything different is happening. Get on with the repairs, but be sure to wear rubber gloves."

"You bet!" The linesman grabbed his clamps and fixed them to his boots before approaching the nearest pole where several insulators had been torn away. "S'long!"

THE two policemen rode over the ridge, following the trail left by the last party of blacks who had passed that way. Together with this trail they found a long, shallow groove cut in the ground and this they followed more than a mile from the line of telegraph posts until they came to thick mulga scrub in showy blossom. There was no doubt about this groove; it was the mark made by the dragging of the stolen wire.

Then the corporal stopped with a grunt, and pointed to a clearing on their right.

"What do you make o' that?"

Clear in the sunshine showed four small holes. Stakes had been driven into the hard-baked ground and afterwards removed. The groove ceased at this spot, and they could discern the signs left by the trampling of many bare feet.

Memory of cable laying gangs he had seen at work came to Reg Rand.

"I'll say they rigged a drum up there on a stand with a windlass. They wound the wire in from here, then carried it away on poles."

"Huh! I think you're right, but it only shows there's more back of this than we thought, Rand. Who ever heard of blacks having enough savvy to roll cable up on a drum before carting it away? Where'd they get their drums from?. . . I'm going on. There are the deeper footprints of the men who carried the heavy drums."

The nature of the country began to change as they went forward. The ground became more liberally strewn with salt bush and cotton bush. Reedy looking mallee scrub, or mulga in broom, was interspersed with a lone acacia or a small clump of grass trees.

It was a long trail which finally brought them to the edge of the Polygonum Swamp, a desolate paradise for pelican, wild duck, bustards, cockatoos, and galahs. The previous wet season had been a prolific one, and the vast area of salt marshes glinted dully in the fading light. No man knew how many square miles of it there were. It was a vile, unhealthy district, mosquito ridden, and rotten with fever.

They reined in their mounts and climbed from the saddles. The tracks made straight for the reed grown swamp and then vanished. That spongy surface would not retain the imprint of a human foot for more than an hour. No telltale marks remained on that smooth, treacherously green surface.

"This is where we finish. It sure would be a fool's game to try to get through that."

"Yes, I was afraid of this happening. We daren't venture any further. Most of that mud is bottomless. The blacks know where rocks and stones just below the surface will give them foothold, but if we tried it we'd be bogged in five minutes. I once saw a *brumbie* bull make a mistake on the Brunette side of this same swamp. He never got out again."

It was an impassable area after the wet season. Maybe later in the year, about June or July, the mud would cake and crust hard enough to enable a light walking man to reach the settlement of *myalls* that existed somewhere near the center. It had been by this means, several years before, that Corporal Murray had penetrated to the village of old Gingin on the occasion of a plague, succoring the fever ridden blacks with white man's medicine.

Murray knew he could not hope for that luck again.

"Let's go back and camp somewhere for the night. There's a waterhole not far from where we left Burke. We'll have to await the result of your scheme, Rand."

As they moved away they fancied they heard a laugh. It might have been the cry of some bird among those myriads that fluttered and swooped over the swamp, but to Murray's mind it was the jeer of a hidden watcher who had seen the white men baffled. He clenched his teeth and swore under his breath.

Back near the telegraph route they camped. The Government had erected a line of windmills over wells at convenient intervals along the transcontinental telegraph, and most travelers camped near one or other of these, the only havens to be found in that scorched wilderness. The policemen did not want their presence in the neighborhood advertised quite so flamboyantly as that, so they tethered their horses in the bed of an old creek which had long since run dry.

Before eating they scouted forward and noted that the poles which had been bare that morning were now linked by new and shining cable. Burke's supplies had begun to arrive, and the linesman and his black helpers had loosely strung the wire along the poled route. Burke was a quick worker, but he had not waited to attach the new cable very tightly to the insulators. He had his reasons.

Without a smudge fire to keep away the pests, they spent a very uncomfortable four hours. Everything was so still that their ears literally ached with the intensity of the silence. Not even the faintest of breezes stirred the stunted wattle that fringed the creek. They might well have been the only men in the world.

The time seemed endless. Murray rolled over to whisper that he was afraid nothing was going to happen that night, when a shrill shriek of terror burst out about a quarter of a mile forward and to their left.

"Got em!" muttered Rand, and led the way at a run.

The shrieks continued, like those of a soul in torment; the scant bush resounded to the scuffle and scamper of many running forms. The *myalls*, whose approach had been unheralded by the slightest sound, were not as cautious as they beat a hasty retreat.

The policemen reached the telegraph line, and followed the glittering wire to the south in the starlight. Then they saw what they had expected to find, a twisting, writhing figure at the top of a pole.

A native had climbed one of the telegraph supports and gripped the wire close to the insulator with the intention of cutting it. Now it seemed he found it impossible to let go. His shrieks were heartrending.

"It worked!" grinned Rand, glancing triumphantly at the gaping corporal. "The poor boob will sure die of fright if we don't get him down . . . Where are those cutters?"

Murray made for the next pole on the Powell's Creek side of their victim. Burke had given him a pair of insulated wire cutters, and with these it was easy to snip the cable in two, the free ends dropping to the ground.

Instantly the trapped *myall* found his hands released, and would have crashed on the back of his head if Rand had not been ready below to catch him.

"Now, sonny, let's have a look at yeh."

The Texan was rather proud of his idea. He had suggested that for one night only the power plant at Daly's should be coupled direct to the overland telegraph. Of course, the telegraph instruments had been disconnected at the various point stations, and the glittering new wire had become alive with nearly two hundred volts.

The wire thieves, who had handled similar wires for so long with complete impunity, had known nothing of the invisible change in the cable, and this terrified prisoner was the result.

The shock had given him a nasty shakeup. His arms were still numb and somewhat burnt, although he had suffered no serious injury. The current had not been powerful enough to really damage his system, and they had rescued him less than five minutes after he had been trapped.

He lay face to the ground, hugging himself and moaning with terror. He was a twisted, wizened little swamp man, unclothed, with ribs standing out like the skeleton of an unfinished boat. All his tribe were like that, making up in cunning for what they lacked in brawn and brains.

Murray signed to Rand, who grabbed the *myall* by the neck and hoisted him to his feet. He blubbered when the corporal's stern gaze was turned upon him.

"O man of Gingin," challenged the corporal in the debased dialect spoken by only the lowest of the inland tribes. "You have been caught by the magic of the white men in the act of stealing the wire-that-talks."

The black feller howled, half crazed with terror.

"The invisible spirit of the wire-that-talks has got into your body," went on Murray. "Slowly it will eat to your heart, and then you will die, O man of Gingin."

The *myall* sank to his knees, grabbed Murray's legs and begged for mercy. He had only carried out the commands of his chief, he said. It was not his fault that he had been sent on the raid. He was a man of peace, and had only been brought along because he could climb quickly.

Murray pretended to consider.

"There may be truth in what you say. I will be merciful. Do one thing for me and I will drive the spirit from your body so that you may live."

"O massa, I will do anything you command. Promise to drive the magic from my body and I will do anything."

"Huh!" grunted the burly corporal, winking at Rand. "Rise, guide us through the swamps by the secret path to the village, and I will save thee. We must have word with Gingin about this thing."

The *myall* mumbled with horror. In his tribe, death was the punishment for treachery of that sort. The swamp path was the most jealously guarded secret of his people. Yet he much preferred to die by the spears of his own kind. Even that would be better than dying by this queer magic which had crept out of the wire and flashed up his arms to his body.

"I will do it!. . . Come."

"Tie a rope about his middle and hold the other end, Rand. We'll ride slowly and take no chances."

NOT until nightfall the following evening did they arrive once again at the marshes of Polygonum. It was ticklish work following their frightened guide, as nerve racking as anything that had ever happened to either of them since their coming to the Never-Never Land.

Their horses had been left grazing among the cotton bush. They had to go on foot through those gurgling, sucking swamps, and as the moon had not yet risen, black darkness shut them in on all sides.

Banda, the man who led them, seemed to know the way by instinct. He knew the hidden stepping stones that alone made it possible for men to cross. Places which looked like bottomless mud proved to have solid rock about six inches below their surface, while more rugged areas, with twisted patches of polygonum that would have tempted any unknowing man to tread less cautiously, were shunned by him with every appearance of horror.

They went quietly, and Rand told his prisoner that he would carve out his heart and liver if he made a sound. They both believed in the element of surprise. They knew the swampmen had fled to their island refuge as soon as disaster had overtaken Banda. They wanted to reach them before they gathered their wits.

The way seemed endless. Once Murray took a short cut and tried to put his weight on a dark mass which looked like a fallen tree of substantial girth. It crumpled to dust beneath his boots, for all but the shell had rotted, and if Rand had not grabbed him in time he would have gone into the hungry maw of the crusted black mud. After that, they kept very close behind Banda, and followed his every footstep.

For more than two miles they made this slow progress, and then saw the light of fires through the bush. Their guide hung back more and more. They were on solid ground, and he dreaded the wrath of his fellows.

Corporal Murray divined his thoughts. "You have done well, Banda. The evil spirits have departed from your bones. No harm shall befall you. Go your way and say nothing about guiding us here. We will go forward and have speech with Gingin."

The guide scuttled away among the trees as soon as he was released, and the corporal took the lead. They were approaching the settlement of the black fellers.

A strange sight greeted their eyes when at last they reached the fringe of the bush. A tribal conference was in session, and surely a more repulsive looking lot of human beings had never before been gathered together, thought Constable Rand, as he felt for his six-shooter.

All were undersized and naked, many were cripples, and every man, woman, and child showed signs of fever. Some of them were so sodden with it that they looked yellow in the firelight. Gingin, the chief, who was speaking, had an out-sized head, and limbs so shrunken that he could not stand unless he was supported by two henchmen.

Corporal Murray wasted no time on preliminaries. He drew his gun, signed to Rand, and walked boldly into the lighted circle.

"Gingin, I want speech with you!"

There was a loud clucking of horror as the two hundred amazed *myalls* scrambled to their feet and turned towards the uniformed pair. Gingin himself nearly collapsed, and turned ashen gray.

"I see you, white man," he quavered. "It is he who saved us from the plague. Welcome, friend of my tribe."

Murray walked straight through the center of the mob, and confronted the chief sternly.

"This time I come not in friendship, Gingin. Your people have done wrong. They have stolen the wire-that-speaks, and caused us much trouble."

"I know not of what you speak, master!" wailed the old hypocrite.

The corporal nodded to the American, and Rand knew what was expected of him. He began to search the lines of *gundhies*, as the hovels of the blacks are called, and he had not far to go, for in the bark shelter that belonged to the chief he found no less than ten drums of copper telegraph wire.

He rolled one back into the firelight, and the crowd shuffled uncomfortably. Their guilt was proved.

"So be it," said the corporal. "For many men there will be great punishment over this. For many nights your people have robbed us. Now all has been found out and the law shall deal with you . . . But first you shall tell us why this thing came about. What use to the swampmen is the wire-that-speaks only the language of the white men?"

Gingin looked sullen. He could not understand how the police had crossed the swamps; here he was being browbeaten before his own people, in his own settlement. He felt the indignity.

"You speak big, master. Yet you are but two whereas I have as many as a hundred men to obey me. Why should I answer your questions?"

IN THE bush a *kookooburra* bird mocked with contemptuous laughter. Corporal Murray flushed; he seemed to swell. He never allowed a black to outbluff him. His revolver crept forward until it was no more than an inch from the chief's nose, and remained there. In the background Reg Rand thumbed back his safety catch.

"Because, Gingin, I have but to press my finger and not even six hundred men could help you live a single second longer . . . Be not foolish. Answer my question. Why did you steal that wire?"

The *myall* cringed. His decaying race have only the remnants of the spirit of rebellion left in them.

"A white man tempted us to do it," he grunted sulkily. "He paid us well for it with whisky."

"A white, eh?" The corporal flashed a surprised glance towards the impassive Texan. "Now I come to look closer, Rand, there's the name of a Sydney firm on those drums. Some dirty crook must have supplied 'em to these blacks and made 'em steal the stuff . . . What's the game?"

Rand grunted. It was a new one on him. In his time he had dealt with dope runners, bootleggers, hijackers, and cattle rustlers, but wire poachers were something outside his experience.

"What manner of man was this white master?" demanded the corporal. "Tell the truth, Gingin, and maybe your punishment will be the lighter."

"He was big, and had hair the color of the bush during a drought, master. He spoke my men fair, and promised us much whisky for more of this wire-that-talks. One moon ago he came with these drums. He comes again to collect them when the moon is full."

Murray was about to ask how the drums had been brought across the desert, for it was at least a hundred and eighty miles to the coast, but he happened to glance up at the great yellow orb that was even then just rising out of the swamp.

"Guess it's full moon right now, Corporal," broke in Rand. "Think we're goin' to be Johnny-on-the-spot tonight?"

Murray shrugged his shoulders. Now he had discovered there was a white crook at the bottom of this business, all his anger against the pitiful swampmen had vanished. What black could resist the offer of unlimited booze? The wire poacher, whoever he was, knew the right line to take.

"Listen, Gingin, and I will still be your friend. Tonight my friend and I will hide among your *gundhies*. Be careful that nothing is said when the white man arrives. Tell him not that we are here, and make no interference when I seize him. In that way only can your tribe escape my wrath."

"You speak fair," growled Gingin, looking relieved. "Even now my guides have gone to fetch the white man through the swamp. When he comes——"

Crack! Crack!

A bullet tore the shirt sleeve on Rand's right arm as his quick ear first heard the sound that made them turn. Another hummed by Murray's ear. Before they could recover from the shock there came a rush of feet from the other side of the *gundhies*, and a big fair man, with a face the color of a newly baked brick, thrust a six-shooter under the corporal's nose.

"Well, Mister Policeman, what about it?"

"Huh!" grunted Murray, and swiftly ducked under the nose of the gun.

But this time he was tackling someone who knew all the rules of the game. The other man's foot swung up, and his heavy boot caught the corporal in the pit of the stomach. The corporal went down to stay down, just as a horde of white gowned figures flooded the clearing.

They were Afghans, tall men, brown skinned, with aquiline features and quick, lithe movements. Rand had only time to realize who they were before he was bowled over beneath an overwhelming number of them. In the scrimmage his gun was knocked from his hand, someone sat on his chest, a glittering knife was held to his throat, and he heard old Gingin laugh mockingly.

"'Ghans, by heck!" he muttered. "Stinkin' camel drivers."

He began to understand a lot of things, for he had been in the Never-Never Land long enough to come up against the camel trains which to a large extent take the place of horse transport in the deserts of the interior. Imported beasts, they were, together with their drivers, and he had always hated the scrofulous brutes almost as much as his horse had.

This bunch were the white man's henchmen, and once the police were overwhelmed, they looked to him for orders; their gleaming teeth glittering in the firelight as they jabbered amongst themselves at the unexpectedness of this coup.

"Tie 'em both up!" grated their leader. "Then we'll talk . . . The corporal's comin' round. Thought 'e wasn't much 'urt."

And while the cowardly *myalls* watched in apparent glee, the two uniformed figures were trussed like fowls for the roasting.

"So I arrived a little earlier than I was expected, eh?" grinned the man with the straw colored hair. "I 'eard that interestin' little talk you 'ad with Gingin. Askin' 'im a lot o' questions, eh. Well, I ain't seein' any reason why you shouldn't know all, Mister Corporal. A bloody fine lot o' good it'll do yer, I don't fink. Pete Broode's my name, an' I know 'ow to look after meself."

"That name'll figure on a charge sheet before long," growled the corporal, trying to fight down an overpowering feeling of nausea.

"I don't fink so, mister. You'll never make no charges against anyone. Before morning my camels'll take us more'n fifteen miles from these 'ere ruddy swamps—fifteen miles from where you two'll be turnin' up yer toes."

"Say, sonny, d'you mean to say you'll commit murder fer a measly bit o' copper wire?" broke in Rand, hardly able to believe his ears.

The Aussie guffawed as though it was the richest joke he had heard for a long time.

"What are you, a blasted *jackaroo?* Don't you know they always uses the very best quality wire on this overland line? . . . Gingin says he's got eight miles o' the stuff, an' I'm payin' 'im a case o' third rate whisky. It ain't such a bad exchange, cobber. There's a certain skipper waitin' fer it down near Port Roper who'll give me four hundred quid fer the lot when I gets it on board . . . Don't say you've got the flamin' cheek to tell me your skins are worth that much to me!"

"You swine!" murmured the corporal. "Don't you know these *myalls'll* give you away when the news leaks out? D'you think we shan't be missed?"

Broode lighted an excessively foul pipe. He looked amused, and his enjoyment was reflected in the fierce faces of his Afghans.

"Thing I give a damn what 'appens to the blacks when I've quit? One white man's much the same as another to 'em. If the ruddy cops are goin' to rely on their description to catch me, I'm not goin' to lose any sleep over that. As fer my 'Ghans, they do as they're told, an' they've been offered a hundred quid to obey orders an' keep out o' the way while I'm takin' a little 'oliday down in Sydney. Transport contractor, that's what I am, an' I'll be packin' loads across these blasted deserts long after your names are off the roll."

He turned to Gingin, and began giving directions for the disposal of the two policemen. But he soon found that the *myalls* had such a wholesome respect for the uniform worn by the two prisoners that they would not listen to the various suggestions for the killing of Murray and Rand.

Broode swore under his breath, but he knew just how far he could go with the blacks.

"All right, Gingin. You don't want to shoulder any of the blame, eh? . . . Well, we'll fix it another way. We'll let the swamps take the blame."

Gingin winked cunningly.

"They know the swamps. They have crossed them," he mumbled.

"Not without a guide. My men and I saw it. You've a bloody traitor in your bunch . . . Have the pair taken to the center of the swamp and left there to themselves, Gingin. Then have your men return and heed them no more. They'll try to find their way back to safety, and will perish through their own foolishness. You can't be blamed for what they do themselves, can you?"

That appealed to the peculiar psychology of the *myall*. He clucked his approval, and took a long swig from the bottle the Aussie cunningly chose to hand him at that moment.

Gingin bubbled over with glee. Of course he could not be blamed if the swamp drowned the policemen! It was a wonderful idea.

He gave orders for some of his men to carry out Broode's suggestion. Murray and Rand were searched and relieved of all their valuables before they were carried away from the camp slung between poles.

It was no good arguing. Murray might have succeeded in bluffing a way out of their predicament if Broode had not been there, but by this time the whisky had begun to have effect. The case had been broached, and the blacks were planning to hold a wonderful *corroboree*. They were as wax in the hands of the man who made these delights possible.

Step by step the trussed pair were carried to the heart of the swamps. The sure footed blacks knew every inch of the way, and finally came to a tangled mass of bush that formed a small islet of comparatively safe ground.

There they set down their prisoners and cut their bonds before scampering away with shrieks of derision. Rand furiously made after them, but he had not gone a dozen paces before one of his feet sank into a mudhole, and he only saved himself by a miracle of balance.

"Come back, you blazing idiot!" snorted the corporal, rubbing his lacerated wrists. "At least wait till the sun comes up. That lousy dingo of a wire poacher's got the laugh on us."

THE moon was still high, but that did not help them very much. About a quarter mile to the north they could see Broode and his Afghans transporting the drums of stolen wire to the mainland, guided every step by two of Gingin's men. The contractor waved towards the marooned pair before going out of sight. He seemed well pleased with his night's work.

"I'd jest like above anythin' else to have that skunk in my hands fer about three minutes," drawled Rand, between his teeth, as he plucked an inquisitive mosquito from the region of his right ear. "By the time I'd finished with him even a camel'd shy at the sight o' his face."

"Wishing never did anything," retorted his comrade. "We're cornered, and our only choice is between being swallowed by the swamp and stopping here to be eaten alive by the flies an' skeeters, not to mention starving . . . And all for eight miles of copper wire!"

"We might be seen tomorrow," suggested the Texan, hopefully.

"About as much chance as there is of the swamp freezing," he was told. "We want that airplane you twitted Burke about."

There was silence after that, but for the continual buzzing of the mosquitoes. Every biting insect in the swamp seemed to have received word that there was a free feed for the taking at that little two by four island. The pair fought frenziedly against the swarming pests, but it was a one sided combat and their faces and hands soon ran with blood, while their eyes began to swell and close.

"I'd sooner drown!" snarled Rand, leaping to his feet.

The corporal imitated his example, but extended one arm towards the south.

"Someone coming! Wait a while."

It was true. Across the morass a solitary native was picking his way with marvelous ease, sometimes running, sometimes taking great leaps. He was making straight for them, and when he came near enough they recognized him. It was Banda, the man who had been caught on the wire and forced to guide them to the village. Rand picked up a hefty chunk of rotting wood, heavy as lead with water.

"If he thinks he's comin' to guy us from a safe distance, he's goin' to get the shock of his young life!"

Banda did not stop. He arrived on the tiny island where they were standing, almost breathless, his eyes rolling with terror. He knelt to Corporal Murray.

"Master, I cannot return to my own people. The other white man has told them I was a traitor, that I showed you the way across the swamp. They will surely kill me."

"Well?" snapped Murray.

"Let me serve you, master. Swear to take me far from here and I will guide you across the swamps."

"Done!" The corporal's open hand came down on the *myall's* bare back with a resounding slap, and Banda let out a howl. "You can name any reward you wish, and shall live far from here in peace, if you'll only guide us to solid ground . . . I promise."

"Come!" clucked Banda, throwing a scared glance towards the distant village.

They needed no urging, but followed him in single file as they had previously done that night. At last they reached the edge of the swamps, and sighed with relief.

Murray stretched himself mightily.

"Now if they haven't made off with our horses we'll nab the swine yet!" He glanced aside at his companion's slightly surprised expression. "Forgotten the spare guns in our holsters?"

"Hell! I sure had!" exploded Rand. "It's a chance."

Banda stuck to them closer than a leech. His only hope of earning safety lay in helping them, and now they found his aid invaluable in tracking down their mounts. The hated scent of the camels had caused the horses to break loose, and they were located more than a mile away in the bush.

Armed once more, the policemen turned, meaning business. There was no need of a native tracker to guide them to the Afghan camel train; the stench of the mangy beasts was enough, and the Afghans themselves were snarling and shouting as they loaded the heavy cable drums onto the unwilling camels.

Pete Broode was there, using language and feet impartially as he hastened the movements of his men. He wanted to be well away from the swamps before daybreak. Each bearing a load of about five hundredweight, the camels could be expected to cover fifteen or twenty miles day in and day out. Broode had made up his mind that they were going to break that record on their way to Limmen Bight.

The brutes were all loaded at last, and their drivers were kicking them to their feet. Half the clumsy animals had lurched to an upright position, and the train was about to start when the two horsemen burst from the scrubby mallee bush and closed in upon Broode.

The wire poacher snatched for his own six-shooter, but before his fingers could close on the butt the Texan's gun spoke, and the Aussie crashed from the camel's back with a shattered elbow.

"I'll see to him!" yelled Rand. "You 'tend to the 'Ghans, Corporal."

The Afghans did their best; rallying to their leader with rare pluck, but knives, however keen, are a poor match for revolvers in the hands of men who know how to use them, and by the time two of the gowned foreigners had been killed and three or four wounded, the rest either scattered or surrendered.

Broode, his arm in a sling, and a fixed scowl on his face, was returned to the back of his camel. As the sun rose the cavalcade moved off, the disgusted mounts of the policemen snorting and fighting to avoid close contact with the humped beasts which bore the missing cable towards the overland telegraph route.

Pete Broode rode in front with the corporal, while Rand and the *myall* brought up the rear, the Texan ready to shoot at the slightest sign of any break on the part of the prisoners.

But there was no trouble. Bill Burke was encountered at the first well, and he obligingly tapped in on the new cable and prepared those at Daly Water for the coming of the strange procession. Daly station turned out a score of herders and rabbiters to relieve the exhausted policemen. Their hard trek was over.

NEITHER promotion nor reward came to Corporal Murray and Constable Rand, but they had not expected anything and were not disappointed. It was all in the day's work of the Northern Territory Police.

The same pair had the pleasure of calling on Gingin a month or so later, to acquaint him with the fact that they still lived, and that the Port Darwin authorities had decided it would be better for both the morals and the health of the swampmen if they vacated their refuge and settled in the bush to the east—an order the two policemen were prepared to enforce.

As for Banda, he got over his fright, and became a professional tracker attached to the police headquarters at Darwin, but for the rest of his life it is doubtful whether he will ever willingly approach a coil of wire or the overhead telegraph that runs across country to the coast.

A Complete

SIX-SHOOTERS? Sure enough, most of the boys carry them out on the range or in the hills—just in case, you might say. One of them's mighty good to have to signal with, comes a time you're throwed or caught in a rock slide, and lying out with a busted leg. And then I've heard some waddies tell how every now and then they blow the heads off a couple or three rattlers.

I just never did happen to see that done real convincing. Back about fifteen years, when I was bookkeeper and—by courtesy—top wrangler with the CT spread, The Wasp—you've heard of him, a-course; he was reckoned to be both fast and accurate—was riding in from Lamar with Bud Jamieson and me. We'd had two-three drinks, but no more.

Right there in the road a fat, lazy looking rattler was taking the afternoon sun. Our horses got stepping fancy and shied away. But then, when Mr. Rattlesnake lifted up his head, kind of bored like, The Wasp kneed his pony off to one side, slid his hand inside his vest, and came out with his black "Stinger Special"—as he called it. The gun was a Colt's .38 on a .45 frame, and even at that time he had four notches filed in the black wood butt.

Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham! Five shots.

Chk-a-chk-a-chk! buzzed Mr. Rattler. He hadn't been hit though the gumbo was plowed up all around him.

"Dammit. I got the shakes!" snarled The Wasp, right exasperated. He was thumbing in six new shells from his belt, his fingers wabbling like they were loose. And he was sore as hell, of course.

Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham!

Six more shots.

Chk-chk-chk-chk-chk-chk!

The snake was getting peevish now, himself; and me, I didn't blame him. He hadn't been killed any to speak of, but he was getting all set to do a little plain and fancy murdering on his own hook, if only one of these horses or men would just come close enough.

"Oh, hell!" said Bud Jamieson, disgusted. "I ain't never packed a gun, 'cause I didn't want to have to scrap dangerous guys like you, 'cept with fists. But what a false alarm you are. I'm going to get me a good, juicy boloney sausage, next time I'm in town. And any one of you gunmen gets snooty with me, I'll swing the Armour & Swift on you!"

Novelette

WILL o' the WASP

A Western Story of One Who Wore the Brand of Cain

By

ANTHONY M. RUD

Then he dismounted, went up to the snake, and with a lash and a snap of his quirt sent the reptile's head sailing out into the sage.

"Better take the rest of him home for a hatband," he said caustically. "He's cost you thirty-three cents in ammunition."

REALLY, though, The Wasp wasn't all false alarm, by a whole lot. He was about as dirty dangerous as any man I've known close up during forty-eight years in the Southwest. Well, maybe Billy The Kid was deadlier. But Billy could make you like him, if he'd set out to do it. The Wasp never had a real friend, as far as I know. Certainly he didn't deserve one.

I've really got to tell you something about him. His folks had been a covered wagonload of Pike's-Peak-Or-Busters. And they had busted, somewhere in northwest Kansas. All of them had been killed, except this undersized, thirteen year old terror—they called him little Nathaniel Pickering then.

A patrol from Fort Smith picked him up, starving. He was holding onto a flint-lock musket, twenty inch spear bayonet set. At his belt hung three Indian scalps.

"They killed three of us: I killed three of them." That was all he said right then. But later they got out of him that he'd stalked lone bucks of the killer band.

A hardboiled old army sergeant brought him in. And this sergeant, who had earned his chevrons with Scott in Mexico, really was more than half shocked. "If *this* is the kind of youngster they're makin' now, deliver-r-r me from the next big scrap! I'm retiring, in a year, thank God!"

He never got the chance to retire. He took charge of the runty waif who had killed three Indians. About four months later the sergeant, gruff and kindly, but strict according to his lights, undertook to larrup young Pickering for a supposed fault. The boy, taking two swipes with the flat of a bayonet, turned like a tiger. He snatched the bayonet out of the hands of his mentor, and instantly jabbed the old sergeant through the body.

The old noncommissioned officer died a few hours later, and Nathaniel was court-martialed. It happened that he was able to prove conclusively that he had *not* been guilty of the offense for which he had been disciplined. So with reluctance he was set free, but banished from Fort Smith and told that he would be shot on sight.

if he came near there again. He never did. He had found out all he wanted to learn of the Army.

If you'd ask the boys now, like as not they'd remember The Wasp for the six-gun killings he done at Caton, Hartnett and Lamar. I'm not saying he couldn't unlimber his hoglegs and get them smoking real fast—even if not so accurate. He could. But at five-ten feet, it's speed, and not perfect bull's eyes that counts the most. And though he got to shaking with a sort of palsy every time, that was maybe why he thumbed 'em out so fast.

I happen to know that for his first and most earnest murdering, though, he liked a sawed-off shotgun hung under his coat—or a bayonet, with the elected hombre looking the other way. Just on suspicion of something like this, they gave him a 3-7-77 notice up to Helena; and The Wasp swore he wouldn't run for anybody. He drank a pint of Miners' Wash, buckled on enough hardware to start a new Sioux uprising, and then went down to make his will.

That was the first time he pulled that stunt, as far as anybody knows, but he surely got pizen queer that way before the time came he really needed that last and final document. Seems like just then there was a gambler down to Virginia City he especially hated.

After paying Lawyer Leadbetter twenty bucks for the signed and witnessed papers, which willed about four hundred dollars' worth of saddle, horse, guns and gold to his enemy—the gambler, The Wasp went back to the Last Chance to drink himself courageous, so's he could face his demise through powder smoke.

But along about dawn, with two-three hours of his twenty-four still left, it must have been that the peppered whisky died in him, or something. He wandered out, got his horse and warbag, and fogged out of town. Helena was well rid of him.

Down at Virginia City, about a month later, a slick tinhorn gambler was found spread all over a cot bed where he'd been sleeping.

Nothing would have connected The Wasp with the killing—and a whole lot of men thought Perce Newhall, as the gambler called himself, had needed it a whole long time—except that The Wasp got pie-eyed, and made a new will.

This time he didn't have much to leave anyone, so Lawyer Castaens only soaked him five dollars. The Wasp, who didn't ever work much to speak of, simply couldn't keep away from gambling games, especially draw poker. Then, he was a sorehead, and trembly when he got excited. And that means Nevada poker sharps could clean him ninety-nine times running, and bet heavy on the hundredth session.

John Castaens, the lawyer, happened to be a member of the Virginia City Vigilantes—probably the toughest law and order gang the State ever saw or will see. Certain things The Wasp bragged about as he was making the new will, in favor of a mining stock promoter who just had skipped with his cleanings, back east to Denver, aroused the suspicions of Castaens. He told the Vigilantes. No matter what Perce Newhall had been, slamming twenty-four Number One buckshot through a sleeping man was a crime which called for a rope, if proved. A dozen jiggers, enough for a jury, bringing with them a new rope slicked with axle grease, came quietly in the night.

But perhaps the suspected hombre had sobered, and remembered what he had said. Or, more likely, some weak kneed swamper had told him of the meeting. At any rate, The Wasp was fully dressed, and standing behind the pine door at the head of the stairs of the Last Chance. When the door was pushed open cautiously, there came two roof shaking reports. The Wasp had let loose into the gang of Vigilantes, with both barrels of a shotgun!

That was all—but it was terrible enough. Five men lay dead or dying on the stairs, while The Wasp went to an empty room where a rope dangled from the window. Two minutes later, and long before the ineffectual pursuit could be organized, he was dusting out the road from town to hell-an-gone at a moderate lope.

The only immediate change this incident made in the career of The Wasp was the fact that at Caliente he bought a razor and incidentals, using them on his black beard and mustache.

DENVER, a-course, was a long way off; and except for the fact that a lot of people had bought some of that worthless mining stock, and were anxious to see Happy Jack Larrimer just once more, his killing wouldn't have been noticed. But as it was, the news reached Virginia City. Castaens hurried east to see what could be saved—if Happy Jack had not spent all his con game loot.

There wasn't much salvage. Probably The Wasp took all the ready cash Happy Jack had in the room. I got back about thirty bucks to square me for the four hundred I'd put in. Such is the life of a sucker, I suppose.

But John Castaens, being pretty keen minded, happened to remember something, and told the Denver police. The Wasp had made another will, and another of the unlucky jiggers who had been made a beneficiary had been smeared all over the floor of a hotel chamber, a kitchen knife left in his gizzard. And the room clerk remembered a clean shaved but tough looking gazabo who had registered for Number Thirty-One but who had left sometime in the night without paying his bill. His name on the register wasn't Pickering; but that didn't signify.

A-course, by that time The Wasp was a long distance from Denver, and still going.

Now, any other State in the whole West would have been healthier for The Wasp than Nevada, but he came back. Every camp, and every red-shirt with a single-jack knew something about him by this time; that he was nice and pleasant to have around—like black smallpox. Nat Pickering, Esquire had one little brain in his head, though. He rode a cattle empty into Caton, and bought himself a brand new cowboy outfit. Said he was a tenderfoot, but willing to learn, when he came to Jim Holloway's CT spread, where I was top wrangler.

Big Auger Jim didn't often make a mistake on a hand; but right at this time the gold and silver strikes at Bullfrog, and Tonopah, and Rhyolite, and Cotton wood Gulch had just sent Nevada completely haywire.

Jim Holloway hired The Wasp; and for quite some time it looked like this particular tenderfoot was considerable of an acquisition. He could ride fair to middling. He shot plain and fancy, doing better on peaceful tomato cans than any of the boys, and drawing like lightning. And he was the world's rottenest poker player.

Honest, I've seen Nat Pickering sulk, and toss in four hearts in line to the ten-spot, refusing to call a third two-bit raise at draw! Then, I've seen him ugly as sin, bouncing and bouncing and bouncing—on two pair, eights and treys!

You can't even say howdy to a fella like that.

AFTER telling you all about Nathaniel Pickering, you'll think I ought to have been able to stop him killing Lew Hurlihy. Lew was a bunkie of mine. The only trouble was this: I didn't know one damned thing for sure about The Wasp—till long afterwards.

Nat—he wasn't using the name of The Wasp, a-course—must have had at least five thousand dollars, all in twenty dollar bills and gold. And then one noon, while we were grabbing chuck as fast as Hang Soon, our Chink, threw it on the table, Nat told a funny story.

"I hit 'em for a gold gool, las' night down to Caton!" he bragged, spitting as he talked. "Won eight-eighty!"

He meant dollars, a-course. Well, nobody said much. We'd most of us been in Caton, branding being over, and we'd heard about Nat's game with Crock Siddall. Crock was pretty near square, as gamblers go; but he didn't figure to lose much.

The funny part of this dinner bragging was that practically every damned one of us knew that Nat had *lost* about one thousand dollars to Crock Siddall! And here he was—Nat, I mean—spilling out how he'd won all this money. He showed it to us, too! Bills. Gold. Yes, he had it! We just kinda looked blank, back and forth. We'd seen what had happened. But then, how can any cowpoke save any big amount of money on forty a month?

"Well, I'll be gosh-dinged!" said Lew Hurlihy, who never swore. "I musta been pie-eyed! I was standin' right behind you."

"The hell you say!" snarled Nat. His face got red, purple. He slammed back his chair and strode out.

That afternoon he rode back into Lamar, got hold of Lawyer Soderburg, and made a will in favor of Lew Hurlihy.

Eight days after that we found a boot sticking out of the bog down at the half dry Strangle Ford. No sign of Lew's horse or saddle. We pulled heavy on the boot, using a rope, and out came Lew.

There was a bullet hole through his chest, but his face was all purple. It looked like he hadn't been any too dead when he'd been throwed into the bog. . . .

Nobody thought of Nat, a-course. Hadn't he just made a will leaving all he had, to poor Lew? That had been strange enough, sure as shooting. But isn't *everybody* funny some way or other? The way Nat mooned around afterwards, you'd thought he'd lost a dear young brother, or more than that. I was out with him and the boss, hunting sign, and I'll swear Nat had me fooled complete. He was just crazy wild, yelling how he'd cut up in chunks the fiend who'd murdered his friend. Huh!

Jim Holloway didn't say much. Maybe he had the start of an idea, even then.

A-course we found out, soon afterwards, that Nat had been lying about winning any jack from Crock Siddall. Crock had taken him, that time, for over eight hundred dollars. And standing there, linen cuffs snicked back so's he could snap out two bulldog derringers faster than even The Wasp could get a six-inch barreled Colt's in action, Crock told him he was "profoundly mistaken." Crock had been educated some; what he meant was that Nat was a damned liar. Also Crock went on to say that at any time or any place The Wasp could have satisfaction, either with pasteboards or guns.

Nat got red. He knew right well he was dead if he made a wrong motion, so just at that time he didn't. He snarled out something about having been drunk and counting his money wrong.

"Well, you're sober now?" sneered Crock.

"Yes, damn you!" yelled Nat. "I'll play you sky limit stud right here now. I hope these boys watch you close!"

The new deck was broken out, riffled, cut, dealt. And then started the most gasp-awful card game I'd ever seen! It was gold and big bills, no checks or I. O. U's, at that first part of the session.

Crock played carefully, as always. He never looked up. His voice got to be a drone.

"Ace bets. . . raise you ten. . . an eagle says I've got a second trey in the hole. . . call. . . no good, mine are nines on nits. . . ."

And so on. It was a slow game for twenty minutes, perhaps. Nat snapped in gold like he was playing crokinole. Hi face was still splotchy red, and his voic husky. He lost three small hands out o five. Steadily but very slowly his pile go smaller. Quite as it should be, everyon there thought. We didn't care so muc about Crock—he was too icy a propositio —but we surely hoped Nat would los every cent of that young fortune he'd bee toting around, unbeknown to us.

He didn't. Quick as a hamstrung calf is pulled apart by wolves, the game busted wide open! With a big hand—queens up —showing, and a third lovely queen in the hole, when it ended, Crock, playing square poker, thought he could break this four-flushing, wabbly fingered gunman once and for all. He went high on his pair of queens, higher on his no-good diamond nine-spot "Curse of Scotland," bet five hundred in twenties on his next queen—which made him threes, a-course—and then slowed down and studied. The Wasp had been standing all this high raising with just two one-eyed jacks showing. But on his last card a third Johnny showed up!

"Still as good as it was. . . .Bet a thousand," droned Crock. He reached into the cuff of his black coat, and drew out two creased and wrinkled yellowbacks, each carrying the figure 500.

A lot of the boys gasped, pressing closer. They hadn't ever seen this big a bill around Caton, though the amount itself wasn't a bit shocking.

The Wasp made a funny noise in his throat like he was choking—or like we all knew he did when he bluffed. He didn't pick up his hole card, on which was lying a half eagle gold piece. Instead, he picked up all the rest of the money he had left, unsnapped a money belt and dumped its contents, then counted it with fingers trembling like he had the jimjams, and shoved it out in the center. There was about $3400, all told!

"Call—and raise you that!" he countered thickly.

Crock smiled. He counted what he had in front of him, added two more of those $500 bills, and then spoke over his shoulder:

"Lend me a hundred eighty, Dad."

He got it in a minute. His credit was good with Dad Sherman, who owned the Lariat Saloon; and Dad was something of a plunger, himself.

"Want to raise back?" he queried, after seeing his gambler's hole card, and laboriously pulling away the rubber band from a wallet.

It was just a second too late—and anyway, even in a sky limit game, most professional gamblers, in a big two handed pot, will give an opponent a show for his white alley when he comes to the end of his money. It's good business, usually.

This time it was bad business. Crock called—and for once in his unlucky card life, The Wasp had a "lock," as it is called. He showed four jacks; and the best the professional *could* have held, with the cards he showed face up on the table, was a queen high full. Which he had. A full house right there, however, was not a bit more good than seven-high bust. The Wasp won.

Crock raised both his white hands in surrender.

"You cleaned me," he smiled. "Down to grubstake again." And he looked at a great big diamond in a ring on the little finger of his left hand, still smiling. He was a lot more polite now; a good loser.

The Wasp wasn't a good winner. "Yah!" he snarled, his little red rimmed eyes narrowing till they only showed blue black. "Shoot you a thousand for it—one cold hand!"

But Crock shook his head.

"You forget I owe one-eighty on it," he said quiet and dignified, and got to his feet. "Another night, another game. Good evening, sir." He bowed like a dancing master, and moved away.

THE Wasp made some kind of a choking noise. His hand reached down to the floor, where he had kept a bottle of forty-rod since the start of the game. But the bottle had been kicked over, only about one drink lying in the side and bottom.

The Wasp did not notice—or did not say anything if he did. He tipped up the bottle, drank, and then swept up his winnings, cramming them any which way into his pockets. He strode up to the bar, planked down a ten dollar gold piece, reached over one long arm, and grabbed the first bottle from the back bar that came to hand.

With that, smashing the neck on the bar edge, he went straight out through the swing doors into the night.

"My Gawd!" whispered Lily Simms in the silence that came. "There's Crock up payin' his last red cent for a drink—an' Nat didn't even offer to buy *him* one!"

A-course a big winner like The Wasp ought to of set up the house; that used to be regular where we all came from.

"Nemmind, gents!" chuckled Dad Sherman, waving his fat hand. "His bottle an' all Crock's drinks are plumb on the house t'night. I won't even ring up his eagle. Let it lay! No, yore measly pile of silver don't go, Crock. I'd 'a' done the same as you on that hand—only more so.

"An' gents," he added with a delighted grin, "didja happen to see the bottle Nat grabbed for his tenner? No-o? Well, I've had it six year an' eight months, ever since I started up here, an' it ain't been opened—nobody ast for it. It was a bitters—a Wop drink called Fernet Branca! Ever taste it?"

"No!" went up the expectant shout. "How about it? What was it s'posed to do?" Many voices.

"I don't reckon I need to tell yuh; jest listen!" Dad, a sort of holy glee on his pale face, held up one hand, wiping the other on his white apron.

From just outside came a horrifying, deathly succession of choking sounds, as some mistaken hombre with a burning throat tried to swallow and then gargle out the whole tepid contents of a horse trough!

Right then The Wasp ought to of ridden away, and taken his particular brand of helliousness to some far range way out of Nevada. He knew absolutely his job was gone on the CT, even if Jim Holloway hadn't heard anything a-tall. Cowpokes will stand a lot; but they don't hanker for liars around—unless, well, the tall talk makers can tell good yarns with a grin apiece, and not get sore if they're called and shown up once every so often.

But maybe the old mountains were in his blood too, like they were in ours; I hope he had that little bit of good in him, but I doubt it. I've got reason. Jim Holloway and I stayed around. I watched one end of town, and Jim was down toward the Hills. I happened to be right across the street from the shack Judge Otto Soderburg used for sleeping and lawyering. When he was judging, a-course, he came down to the Lariat and sat on a high stool behind the bar.

Right now Otto, being a round faced, solemn little Deutscher who treated his ten hours of sleep plumb respectful, was snoring slow but vehement. The front window was open. I could hear that raspy uptake —like a file being pulled across the end of a steer's horn—above the tinkle of the music box down to Mexican Joe's, and the occasional yells from the saloons.

I didn't know where The Wasp had gone after he was through with his gargling session at the horse trough, but a-course I should have guessed. Not having the crust to back and get laughed at for his bitters jag, he had made for the nearest other saloon across the street and next the blacksmith shop. Now he came busting out, slamming wide the swing doors and almost falling off the board sidewalk.

I just got one glance at him as the doors swung back and forth. He was teetering there on the edge of the sidewalk, a bottle in one hand—safe bet *that* bottle wasn't bitters—and his long black revolver in the other.

He managed to stick it, and let out a string of cussing in a hoarse, choky voice. Then, all of a sudden he started down the sidewalk in my direction. I couldn't see him any more, but the rattling of boards and spurs were plain enough.

He pulled up at Otto's shack. There was a pause, a long gurgling sound, and then something whizzed pased not ten feet from my head, and smashed against the tire of a wagon drawn up in Bug Neilan's lean-to shed.

The Wasp scratched a sulphur match, saw where he was, and then kicked open the door to Otto's, which a-course wasn't locked. I heard a kind of squeaky yell, some hoarse cussing, and then I suddenly woke up. Was the crazy fool going in to murder a sleeping man, peaceful little Otto? Yanking out my own hogleg, I ran across the street, dove under the sidewalk, and wriggled up the crack on the other side till I was right beside that open window. Then, thumbing my Colt's, I looked in.

Otto, in a red flannel nightshirt that only came about to his fat knees, was lighting a lamp. The Wasp stood there poking him with his gun barrel, and cussing him into action.

"I want to make a codicil to that the will of mine you got in yore safe!" was th amazing thing I heard next.

"Vould not mornings do as vell?" inquired Otto mildly, sitting down at hi desk, and looking up with his round blu eyes solemn.

"Not by a damn sight! I got money now, a hell of a lot of it; and that there will I made last time is to a dead man! I can't take no chances like that." And he slapped his six-shooter back in leather as Otto began to write, the little Deutscher nodding slow and owlish.

I pulled back from the window, feeling kind of silly. A-course it wasn't any of my business, but I stayed right there and listened. And what a wild earful I got. Without even a hondo you could have built a loop out of me, and roped a rabbit. By and by I sneaked away, feeling like a lead peso.

Back at the Lariat I found Jim Holloway, and told him the tale.

"What's that? *Sh!*" he said in a sharp whisper. "C'mere."

And gripping my arm with those long, thin fingers of his that could wrap around and mash a raw potato, he pulled me away from the bar and into Dad Sherman's "office"—a kind of alcove behind the oilcloth covered roulette wheel.

"Now give me that straight, Hank. He's made a new will, in favor of Crock Siddall—*the man he just broke?*"

"That's the tally, Jim," I said. "It sounds like what a wild drunk'd think of——"

"Hm. Mebbe. All right, Hank, keep yore mouth shut tight. Don't say a word. I got a notion, an' say, *don't* get pie-eyed tonight and talk, or you ride grubline!"

Jim wasn't the sort of boss you'd disobey, if you were half crippled up like I was then. He went right out, and I sort of hung around, bought one drink for Lefty Lewis, had one with him, and then watched a sleepy game of five-handed California draw. After a while I wandered out, the Lariat being so stuffy, and the cool air beginning to sift down from the stars there behind the mountains.

I happened to notice a light was still shining from the side window of Otto's shack. Were those two still at it? Then I remembered how legal and thorough the Deutscher was about everything; it took him five minutes to sign his name and pinch the paper in a sort of forceps he had—a notary's seal, he called it. Hopping down to the dust, I wandered up that way, just in time to see the front door open with a jerk.

A figure came lunging out, tripped on a board, and fell with a crash. Then came a line of hoarse cussing, and I knew it was Nat. He tried to get up, fell sidewise, tried again and made it. In the light from the door I could see, though, that he was heaving like a horse with the staggers.

Then he went down, and this time off the sidewalk. He flopped a little—and then came a snore. Nat was feeling that last bottle he had guzzled.

Otto heard and came running out. He climbed down and looked at Nat, tried to lift him. Finding that was no go, Otto rolled Nat carefully under the sidewalk where he wouldn't get walked on by a horse.

I just grinned and let him do it. After all, pickings for a lawyer judge were sort of slim in Caton, and I suppose Nat looked like a valuable repeater client now, to frugal Otto.

JIM Holloway came back, frowning serious. He cornered me.

"Lookahere, Hank," he said quiet but like he meant something terrible, "have you told them anything?"

"I'm still taking orders from you, Jim," I told him.

"Good!" He didn't smile, but he reached out and gripped my hand when I didn't know he was going to do it. "Then I'll tell you something. I'm after the man who killed Lew Hurlihy, and I'm going to *get* him! I think I know who he is. You stick with me, but keep yore gun sliding easy and yore hand right near the butt. And if you have to shoot, *aim at his legs!*"

"My gun kicks up," I objected.

"Then aim at the floor. One slug is too good a finish for *this* hombre! Now listen. Crock Siddall, even when he lost at cards, showed up Nat Pickering. I reckon I know what that'll do to Nat! I'm going to get Nat down here somehow. Then I'll spring some news. Nat once made a will in favor of Lew Hurlihy, and Lew got killed. Nat then made a will in favor of Crock Siddall, and right away Crock is found dead out on the edge of the playa, shot in the back!"

"Huh?" For a second my mouth popped open; this was too fast a play for me to follow without tightening my cinches, so to speak. But then I got him, and I damn' near laughed. If it wasn't for the death of Crock, whom I never liked much. The whole thing was funny.

"Don't say anything now," I grinned at Jim, who frowned and stared. "Come on along."

I took him out and down the street to in front of Otto's shack. The Deutscher was snoring again, inside. I rolled out Nat from under the sidewalk.

"He couldn't of killed anybody after he made that will!" I told Jim. "He stuck around over two hours with Otto, and the redeye got its hooks in him. When he left this was as far as he got. I saw the whole thing. Otto rolled him under here. That gives him a clean bill, don't it? Looks to me like it does!"

Jim didn't open his mouth for a couple minutes. Then he swung around.

"Le's get our broncs," he said then. "Back at the ranch there's about six hours of shuteye I reckon I need. A-course Crock ain't dead at all; I got him out safe at the ranch—an' there he'll stay. It's safer."

Whether or not he got the sleep, I don't know. Being top wrangler, I had two more days off, though some of the other boys had to spell each other, and take part of their free time later. So I waited around till Hang Soon banged on his dishpan at five o'clock, stocked up on coffee, beans, bacon, sour milk biscuit and strawberry jam, then tumbled in. I reckon I must of fallen asleep in mid-air, because I still had on my boots and spurs when the Chink banged his supper dishpan at five-thirty.

Jim had taken a horse and gone. I guess that he'd ridden out to Strangle Ford, like he'd done so many times since Lew's death. Not that it got him anything; but I suspect that he believed some day he'd meet the killer out there, coming back to see the place he did for a man. That theory maybe works out where a hombre murders just *one* man. But a jigger who's busy on other killings right along ain't likely to moon around and shiver over a dirty patch of quicky where he threw a half dead *compadre*. Jim's hope never worked out; not thataway, at any rate.

After supper I saddled up, rode out to see that my jingler José was on the job at the pole corral, and then meandered, easy like, the six miles into Caton. Took almost an hour.

But back in town things had happened high, wide and handsome since Jim and I pulled out. Seems like The Wasp had turned on his back while he was snoring, along about noon, there under the sidewalk, and a paint lizard had crawled up on his face. Hitching and backing towards and away from this awful but fascinating noise, the lizard had managed somehow to slide his long, thin and scaly tail up into one of the sleepers' nostrils.

Inhaling Nat's alcoholic breath, the lizard presently laid his head on one side and went blissfully asleep, too—but not for long The scaly tail tickled Nat like a road runner's feather in your ear. Nat's snores got musical, sort of bugle like, the lizard's tail vibrating like the strings in a jew's harp.

But then Nat sneezed violently. It didn't bother the lizard; that critter had hooked the end of his tail back where it would hold. So when Nat sat up finally and bumped his head, on the sidewalk above, he couldn't figure at all what was the ail of his nose—until he hands-and-kneed out into the sunlight, wiped the tears from his red rimmed eyes, and saw what was hanging from his proboscis.

First his eyes bugged out; I reckon he thought this was the D. T.'s. Then he gave a wild shriek that was heard clear down to Hassayampa Pete's cave in the Corduroys. He jumped upon his hind legs and did a wild fandango, holding his red-purple nose and yanking at that poor, peaceful lizard, which went on sleeping. And then a couple or three minutes later he was hightailing it for the Lariat, a mashed up lizard in one hand, and his six-shooter cocked in the other. A trickle of blood was streaming out of his right nostril, but he didn't pay it any attention.

"Who done it? Who *done* it?" he yelled, slamming down the lizard and stamping on it, so furious he didn't hardly notice there wasn't one of the CT spread present, all of the boys staying over still being asleep after their fun of the night before, the first night off the range in three months.

A pilgrim in a stiff hat was lounging at the near end of the bar, talking cattle prices with Lukay Larrimore. The town man turned—and just then Nat, who was plumb on the loose, whanged away at the derby. He missed by a yard, his hands shaking then something awful. We all could see it.

The pilgrim was a cattle buyer from Chicago, sent out by the packers, who just then were having trouble getting shipments sent through Denver and Omaha. But the stranger had nerve. One look at Nat told him sufficient. He yanked out a small gun—.32-20 S. & W., all silver mounted—and started shooting.

Yes, he hit The Wasp first crack, creased his ribs on the left side, not three inches from a heart hit. But after that he didn't have a real chance against a thumb-fanner —not at that distance, which wasn't over twelve feet. He went down with a bullet that smashed his breastbone plumb center.

Old Lukay Larrimore, good cattle range man that he was in spite of his white beard, made a fool play. He was red hot furious, a-course, the cattle buyer having been his guest. So he blazed away, and nicked The Wasp—but only plowed a slug through the killer's shirt and some skin at the armpit.

Wham! Wham! Wham! went The Wasp's "Stinger Special," and then the hammer fell on an empty cartridge.

Two of the shots took effect, and old Lukay sagged at the knees. Suddenly he pitched forward on his face, dead.

Cursing, The Wasp dove for the six-shooter which had gone spinning out of his victim's hand, clattering against the brass cuspidor. He got it and without trying to load his own gun, backed crouching against the wall corner of the bar, facing the four-five others who were standing there aghast at the sudden and meaningless tragedy.

"It was self-defense!" yelled The Wasp. "Yuh all seen it! They pulled guns an' hit me first. Anybody denyin' it?" He scowled around, his gunhands jiggling like they was twittering on a fiddle string.

Nobody spoke a word. The way that loco hombre was just then, he was likely to start shooting over anything—or nothing. By and by somebody got a couple of planks; and the two bodies were carried down to Otto's. The Deutscher served as coroner, undertaker—and preacher, too, there not being any regular sky pilot nearer than Lamar.

There was nothing to do, though Lukay's own outfit might have something to say about it later. The Wasp had whammed out a harmless shot at a dude's derby, and the play that followed was just a sort of tragic misunderstanding. When the blood was wiped up, Dad Sherman was back of the bar again, pouring drinks. He had seen too many such happenings, to do more than grunt.

The Wasp didn't stay around. He went into Mexican Joe's, drank a pint of tequila, and then held a private conference with Joe himself. As a result, a small sum of gold changed hands; and a half hour later the doors of the little cantina were barred, a painted board thrust there, bearing this legend:

CLOSES 2 DAY

Oddly enough, the other two cantinas soon followed suit! The Mexicans hung around the street through the afternoon, muttering. Some went to the Lariat, and then more and more. But the chief saloon did not sell mescal, tequila or aguardiente, and red whisky was expensive. The Mexicans did not like it, and wanted to say it with knives; but the cantina proprietors had wisely got out of the way.

EVEN when the Red Hart closed, nobody paid much attention, because for a year or two now the liquor had been pretty bad. But the crowd got thicker and thicker in the Lariat, and the games filled up early. Some enthusiastic cuss started a no limit table stakes—and that proved to be the ruination of Caton, temporarily, at least.

The Wasp, redder than ever of face, and swaggering as he walked, came in through the swing doors and up to Dad Sherman at the bar. He growled some kind of a question at Dad—an offer, it really was. And he didn't make any funny moves toward his gun, either, like he had when dealing with the other saloonkeepers of Caton.

Dad wiped his face with his apron, and stared like he was hearing a funny noise for the first time.

"Wha-a-at?" he bellowed, half angry. "Sell out my saloon? Sell out—to you? Good Lord, no! You ain't seen half enough jack in all yore worthless life, to——"

But The Wasp had heard enough. He had the common sense, in spite of all he had drunk, to know that if he ever opened up on Dad, he would never get out of that room alive. Especially after the two killings at noon.

There was one empty chair at the no limit stud game. The Wasp took it, and sent a Mex for the bottle of whisky he always kept at his feet when he played. I'm real sorry to say that I didn't see much of that poker game, because it must have been a lalapaloosa from the start. Maybe it was the cleaning of Crock Siddall that had given The Wasp some confidence he needed. Or maybe it was just his day—the time when nothing can go wrong. Almost every steady poker player hits such a day or night once in a lifetime! So do other gamblers; if they play with chance-takers of their own ability, and at fair odds.

The four other players this afternoon were amateurs like The Wasp himself. They had paid ten dollars for the use of the table until six o'clock. The flat rate for the night would be twenty-five dollars.

So from the very start The Wasp plunged. He bet high on every card, and got good cards, especially in the hole. By four-thirty he had broken Lije Barmen, who owned and ran the only stage between Caton and Lamar—the only way out of Caton, at this time; the railway had not yet put through its spur. At four-forty-one P. M., one showdown hand later, The Wasp owned seven good horses and the Concord swaybelly out of which Lije for six years had made his living. The Wasp had wagered two thousand dollars in gold against the outfit.

At five o'clock he put up eight hundred dollars gold against Jed Mott's blacksmith shop, and won! The crowd was gasping now; but in spite of the fact at least forty pairs of eyes watched every move The Wasp made—especially when he went down for the bottle—there was not a sign that he was crooked.

Of course he wasn't. His fingers shook so that any such idea was manifest bosh. He was just smoking hot with the pasteboards, and no mistake!

Swede Anderson, who had lost the least

—about three hundred dollars that Dad Sherman kept in the safe for him—pulled a long, gloomy face, stared down at a single rumpled paper eagle left in front of him, and quit the game. He was foreman out at the Belly B (B), and had nothing more to lose except his horse and saddle; and he was too much of a cowman to risk these against a wild hombre who drank and played and drank and bragged that he could not lose.

It seemed as though The Wasp was right. Of course, he dropped hands here and there in the stud, some of them quite big. He wasn't superhuman, in other words. But the steady run of cards was to him, and he pressed them hard. As a result he cleaned even Joe Shields, the conservative. Joe owned the only general store in Caton, and was accounted a fairly substantial citizen.

Joe looked worried. He had emptied his belt, and twice he had gone to Dad Sherman for loans. While all of the boys in the saloon, crowding six deep around the table, forgot to drink, and almost forgot to breathe, The Wasp had the Mex waiter bring him an empty beer case. With three smashes of his foot The Wasp broke down the flimsy partitions which had held the bottles; and then he dumped the splinters out on the floor. In the heavy box he poured that mountainous jumble of gold, paper money, silver, which he had not been able to stuff in his pockets, and hastily witnessed bills of sale.

I came in just then, and I saw. Of course, I had yet to learn what it was all about; but I'll swear that in that box was a pile of currency, and even more valuable paper, which two strong men scarcely could have lifted!

Joe Shields started toward the bar, then turned back. He acted hesitant. Though I didn't guess at the time, the truth was that he had started to ask another loan, and Dad Sherman had made him an expressive sign. Joe already had taken practically all the cash on hand, except a little small change needed at the bar. Dad couldn't help him out, although Joe Shield's word was good with any man in Nye County.

But Joe had made his original stake on the Mississippi River. Though he had been away from that life some years, and had turned absolutely square, the urge of it still was in his blood. He swung back to the table.

"Third time and out, if you're not leary?" The statement was a taunt, and he followed it up with the swiftness of a man who knows he is making a fool of himself. "My store's inventory, and the building and the ground, amount to about thirty-five thousand dollars. I don't know how much you have in that beer case, but it must be close to that sum, with the deeds figured in. I'll shoot you one cold hand, face up, for what you have there, against everything I have in my store—except my dead wife's letters which are in the safe; one Hamley saddle, one bridle, two blankets, a saddle blanket, two plain nickeled spurs, and a slicker!"

"Come and take a deal!" roared The Wasp, splashing down the cards. "Yuh can't beat me!" And he actually upended his own bottle of Kentucky Bourbon while Joe accepted his invitation.

Joe shuffled endlessly. Three of us outsiders cut, one after another. Then Joe dealt. There was nothing to it. The three first cards turned up for The Wasp, were hooks—seven-spots! The best Joe got was a pair of nines.

The Wasp's luck had held—through the deadly test. He owned nearly all of Caton now!

Waddies had been talking to Dad Sherman. Such luck as The Wasp had enjoyed, simply could not hold! It was pretty nearly up to Dad, or else Caton would have to bow to this drunken braggart. Why, hell's bells, he owned the town, all except the saloons! And some people said he had bought out all of the saloons and cantinas, except the Lariat!

Dad was slow to persuade, but very abrupt when he decided. As I said, he was a plunger at heart.

"I'll take you on for a fair-to-middlin' bet," he said, coming up through the crush to where The Wasp was glowering down at a few stray coins on the table top. "Right here I got a pretty good business. It's worth mebbe forty-five thousand, mebbe ten thousand more. In Lamar I got fifteen thousand and some—see, the book?" He poked out his checkbook and also his deposit book, for reference.

"Well, anyway," said Dad, "I'll write a check for fifteen thousand, and a bill of sale to the Lariat and all its stock of liquor and other things to take effect tomorrow morning; this is too damn good a night to spoil. Then I'll shoot you the works on one hand of show-down!"

From the men around came a shaky kind of cheer.

"Against that and the deed to Joe's general store!" added Dad, gesturing toward the beer case full of gold.

"Deal the damn cyards!" snarled The Wasp. "Yo're *on!*" He yelled raucously for another bottle of Bourbon; he was drunk, though he seemed to be steadier. Slowly and carefully Dad wrote out his bill of sale.

The cards were dealt face up, as before. And as before, although all of the watchers nearly died of fluttering heart, there was no doubt about the issue. Dad Sherman had guessed wrong. He got nits and lice—and The Wasp received a full house, sixes on fives!

Except for one other saloon and a pair of Mex cantinas, The Wasp *owned the whole town of Caton!*

AND that was where the town went absolutely loco. Bud Jamieson went around with a two gallon hat, a pencil and a piece of paper, getting contributions toward a stake with which some lucky gambler might win back the town from this yellowbelly and braggart we all had learned to detest. I put in every cent in my overalls—forty dollars which was to see me through this bust, and maybe get me a new pair of Levi Strauses. Mike Hay tossed in two hundred. Swede Anderson gloomily gave up his last ten dollar bill. All the boys who had any money chipped in. When it came to Dad Sherman, he just yanked out the drawer of the cash register, and dumped the contents into the Stetson.

"Nemmind," he waved a hand when Bud wanted to count it. "I'll get it back. Drinks are two for a dollar rest of the night—'cause there ain't a penny of change in the till! And not a cent in my jeans!"

Bud Jamieson was a real poker player, and maybe could have beaten The Wasp, even with all that press of money back of him. But when Bud, who selected to run that shoestring into a million—when a hasty search failed to uncover Crock Siddall anywhere—came to challenge, The Wasp only snorted derision.

"Haw! Haw! Play for *that?*" he guffawed, sneering down at the measly eleven hundred dollars like as if it wasn't more than one white chip. "Hell, I'll cut the cards with yuh . . . ."

They did—and to make everything certain, Bud turned up the deuce of spades, lowest card in the deck! Of course he lost. That bit of painful cash was swept off the table onto the pile in the beer case.

I don't know just when Jim Holloway arrived. The whole place was in an uproar. Some of the men there just ached to take The Wasp out and hang him, on general principles—but actually, that hombre *never* had been safer in his whole life, I expect! There's one sort of imitation man Nevada never would have any truck with, and that's a squealer—a poor sport. So when a couple or three guys got to muttering, they were told to shut up. The Wasp had played square poker, and every one of us knew it. What he had won was his, as long as he could keep it. And we all hoped he'd drink himself to death, without delay.

First thing I knew, Jim, looking tired and drawn like, was over at the table where The Wasp was sprawled out. Jim had a slip of paper in one hand, on which were some penciled figures. He went right up to The Wasp.

"Is that a pretty good estimate of what you've won today?" he asked quietly, putting down the paper on the table in front of The Wasp.

"What's it to yuh? I ain't working for yuh any more, damn yuh!"

The Wasp was pretty drunk, a-course, and getting mean. His voice was thick. A half dozen punchers shifted their hands down. They wouldn't see a good man like Jim murdered by any such stinking range coyote; not by a damned sight!

But Jim didn't seem to notice. His voice stayed quiet.

"I've had the finest luck today a man ever had. I never told anyone before—and the boy himself never knew—but Lew Hurlihy's right name was Lew Holloway! Reckon that's enough to say, to you men, ain't it?"

"Hell yes, Jim! We ain't— I had a couple kids . . ." Many voices. All of us liked and respected Jim. And I thought back on all the good breaks Lew had got, even with all his hothead wildness. This explained why he hadn't been fired, and me, too, half a dozen times . . .

Jim was speaking, still quiet. You could have heard the creak of a professional gambler's holdout harness, in the Lariat, we were that a-scared to breathe.

"Roughly you have won about one hundred twenty thousand dollars, counting in all the bills of sale and money. Do you reckon that about right?"

"Sure. What the hell do I care?" The Wasp stopped to gargle down the last of his bottle, and his red rimmed eyes glared up at his former boss.

"Perhaps you don't care. But twice I have been offered two hundred thousand dollars for The CT Ranch. It is worth more. I'll shoot you the whole outfit, lock, stock and barrel—holding out only my clothes and the papers in my safe, one horse, one saddle, and a blanket roll—against every cent you have in the world, and those bills of sale!"

For a second even The Wasp was shocked sober. The rest of us kind of reeled, wondering if this all was just a nightmare, or if it could be true.

But then The Wasp leaned back and bellowed. He was pretty drunk.

"Haw! Haw! T' have my ol' boss nighterdin' *my* cow critters!" he yowled, interspersing this with plenty profanity. "Sure, shoot a hand—here I'll deal 'em." He grabbed for the cards.

"Like hell you will," said Jim, icy but purposeful. "Here, Dad Sherman, you don't know how to stack a deck. Deal one cold hand, five cards to each, face up!"

"Oh God!" moaned Dad, his face real white—and him a man who had grinned when he lost every cent he had in the world to this same lucky monster. "I'd ruther be shot!"

But he shuffled just the same, several jiggers cut, and then came the end of the world, as far as most of us were concerned. Dad, his fat white hands shaking almost as bad as The Wasp's when the gunman was shooting, slapped down a five-spot, a king, another five-spot, a six of spades.

Why carry out the agony any further? My boss received five assorted cards, of no value whatsoever. That nigger-lucky Nat Pickering, whom I've been calling by his real title, The Wasp, won on a pair of pedros!

And that meant that I—and the rest of CT gang—had a new boss. Penniless as we were, I think every man jack mentally got ready to roll his warbag and fog out of this range for good. The Wasp maybe could get punchers, but we wouldn't be on the spread. Not any!

But Jim Holloway, after passing over the witnessed bill of sale, still had a card up his sleeve.

"Even losing all I've got can't bother me much today, Nat!" he said real cordial. "I've just found out who the inhuman louse is who drowned my Lew in that quicky bog! Tomorrow or next day I'll have everything in hand, and we'll all join in a hanging. How about it, boys? 'Member my Lew?"

A rumble from the rest of us made reply. Right then we'd have hanged the Sultan of Turkey, with anything like an excuse.

The Wasp seemed to get sober all of a sudden. While we all went up to the bar—Jim refusing to tell the rest of his story until he had the whole thing complete—The Wasp sat there sort of rigid. Then he got up and came with us. He had a drink.

"No, I can't tell now," Jim was saying. And then he sprung his fake play. "Poor Crock Siddall saw the killing—but Crock, who died today from a shot in the back, didn't give me the clinching evidence I sure need. I don't want to make any fool mistakes. I want to——"

He stopped. The swing doors had whammed shut behind The Wasp, who had gone into the night, leaving his beer case full of gold back there on the floor!

JIM whispered to me:

"See if he doesn't go to the Deutscher's again! I'm betting on it! A-course Crock ain't *really* dead!"

I went out cautiously, and sure enough, The Wasp was clattering his way down to the shack where he had made a new will the night before! I stayed along just a few minutes—long enough to hear and find out.

"He's making a will in favor of *you!*" I told Jim in awed accents. I didn't understand it then, and I really don't see The Wasp's real idea to this day—but Jim did.

"Don't say a word—no matter what I

seem to do! Better go home when you feel like it. . . ."

Go home! Fine chance. I never was more wide-awake in my life! And I saw Jim order drink after drink, getting more and more pie-eyed. I hated to see it, too, for he was the sort of boss for a man to tie to.

But he got wabbly on his pins. After a time he beckoned me, and asked me to help him to bed. There was three rooms out back where Dad Sherman had used to furnish cots and blankets for the hombres too far gone to put out.

Back in that room something happened to Jim, though. I had half carried him, and he turned in my arms and gripped me.

"I'm all right, Hank; don't think I ain't!" he whispered fiercely. "I spilled all those drinks. Now don't ask fool questions; just do what I say. Go out and tell 'em how yore boss has made a damn fool out of himself—how he's sleeping it off in this room! Be sure to tell 'em——"

"But you ain't drunk? You really ain't?" I was kind of bug-eyed—not any too sober, myself.

"Do what I say, Hank, and don't ask questions!" Jim's voice got cold and stern. It stung.

I went back, blinking, but not asking any more questions. And in the next two hours I sure gave them a pretty yarn about how my boss had gone clean cuckoo, lost his ranch, got drunk for the first time in his life, and now was sleeping it off—*in the last bedroom down the hall on the left!*

I didn't see The Wasp come back. In fact I was trying this newfangled waltz thing through the sawdust, with Bud Jamieson, when all hell broke loose out back.

Sneaking out back while all of us were drinking the last night out with Dad Sherman, The Wasp came to the last room on the left. In his hand was a long, razor sharp kitchen knife—used for slicing ham. He heard regular snores from inside. He lifted the thumb latch carefully, and entered. Down there on the bed, covered in blankets, was what looked like a huddled up human figure.

The Wasp changed his grip on the meat slicer. He clutched it like a dagger—although it was a full fourteen inches long. He raised it high. He swept down with all his strength—meaning to cut through the blankets and all in one sweep, of course.

There was nothing but an extra pillow underneath those blankets.

"Take it out and fight, God damn you!" came a terrible voice from the darkness. It was Jim Holloway.

I can't tell you about that; I wish I could. Even listening from the bar, before any of us got up steam to go and see, there were shrieks and ghastly sounds, gurgles and choked yells, from that back room. And it sounded as though a half dozen mad elephants were knocking down the walls.

When we got there, all was quiet. There was blood on the floor. There were stains on the walls—everywhere! And Jim, his left arm nearly cut from his shoulder, was sitting there on the cot, looking down at something terrible sprawled on the floor.

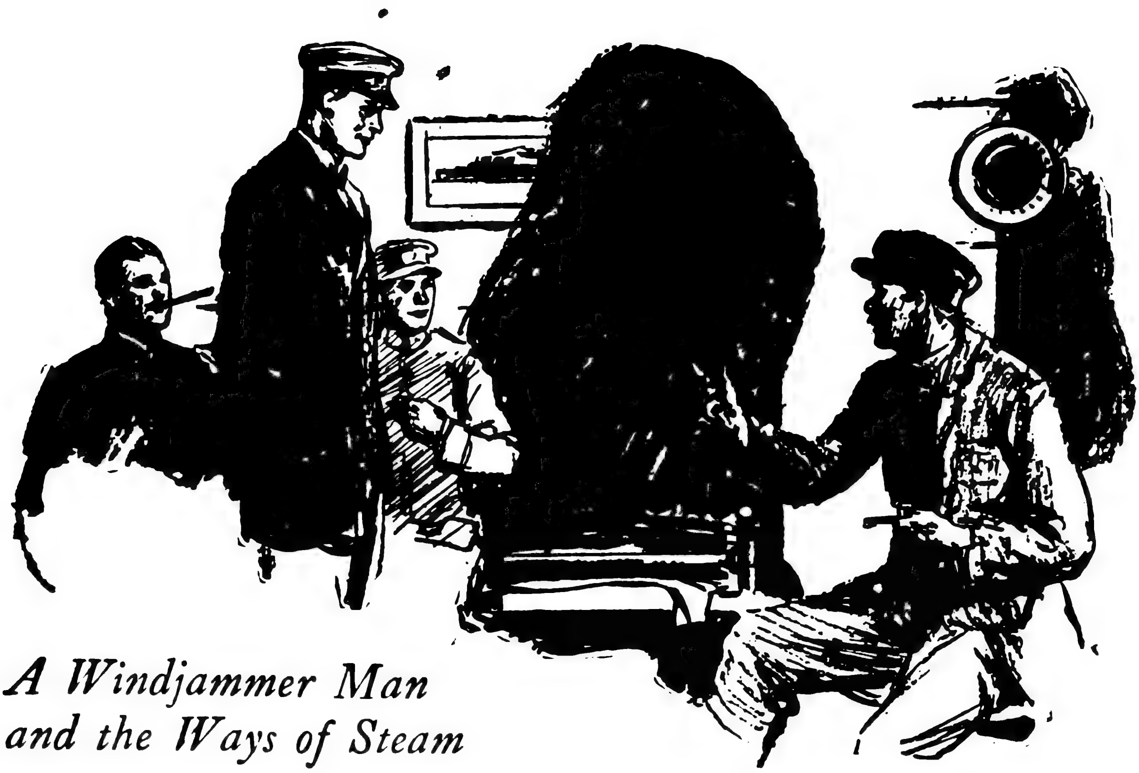
Of course we got pitch and heated that arm for cauterizing. In the end Jim's life was saved. I understand that a while later a surgeon down at Denver even hitched up the nerves so's he could use his left arm again. But I haven't been back to see. That night sent me riding far.

Jim had said, before he toppled over: "I reckon he made his last will in my favor. Ask the Deutscher. If that's so—if that's so—c'mere Hank ol' boy."

Yes, he called for me, and I'm distinctly proud of that! I took the other men back to the bar, once we had Jim cauterized and in bed, where he would stay for nearly six months.

"Jim wanted me to say just this much," I told them, buying a drink on credit, "that he had known a long time who had murdered his son Lew Hurl—I mean, Holloway. This was the only way he could prove it, though. Nat Pickering was crazy on the subject of wills. You can trace that clear back, if you've a mind to; he's made lots of them. When he heard Crock Siddall was dead, and that in a couple of days Jim was going to tell *who* murdered Lew Hurlihy—well, Nat just had to shut up Jim. So he went out with that kitchen knife, and stabbed a pillow dummy Jim had fixed in his bed. And then Jim took him on in the dark—with a bowie! You've seen the rest."

"Hell's bells!" said Bud Jamieson a little shakily. "Yeah! We seen—plenty!"



A Windjammer Man and the Ways of Steam

TOPS'L HAUL

by GRAHAM THOMPSON

TOPS'L HAUL was not his right name. It was a sobriquet that had been bestowed upon him years ago, when he was a young A. B., because of a habit he had—particularly when he was three sheets in the wind—of using the expression, "Hard-a-lee, main tops'l haul," in an imaginary maneuver of tacking ship, and it had stuck to him ever since. A windjammer sailor from clew to earing, Tops'l Haul had never ventured in a steamboat during his thirty odd years of seafaring, and had not the slightest intention of doing so. To him, the sight of a vessel with a pair of straight, stumpy masts and a funnel belching forth volumes of thick, black smoke, was an eyesore, and the crew that manned her he defined as unfit to sail the same ocean as the man who sailed under the tall, tapering spars and the billowy white canvas of the windjammer.

Radical to an extreme in his views, the sight of a steamboat sailor was quite sufficient to fan into a flame the smoldering fire of scorn that always lay within him. And so it was, when he stood with his shipmate, Pug MacCarthy, at the counter of the Bar Ingleterre, in the Boca district of Buenos Aires, and gazed disdainfully on a couple of uniformed sailors seated at a small table.

"They ain't sailors, they're steamboatmen," he remarked, scornfully, to his companion. "I wouldn't be seen dead alongside either one of 'em, an' if ever I should have the hard luck to get so low as to have to ship in one o' them hot water cans, I'd quit the sea and go sweepin' the streets."

"They say they're all right once y' gets used to 'em," said Pug MacCarthy, who was a little more moderate in his views.

"All right, my aunt!" retorted Tops'l Haul. "They ain't ships for one thing, and they ain't safe for another." He steadied himself against the counter and pointed a questioning finger at his shipmate. "Suppose one o' them b'ilers busts, what y' goin' to do? Y' can't set no sail, 'cos the tin can ain't got none. An' supposin' again the dodgasted propeller takes a notion to drop off in the middle of a nor'wester? A fine fix she'd be in, wallowin' around, beam onto wind and sea, until she busts in her hatches and goes down, or drifts to loo'ard till she brings up on the rocks. No, no, me hearty. They ain't for good men like me an' you. We wants a ship where we has something to fall back on, where, if the worst comes to the worst, y' can always stick a tarpaulin in the mizzen riggin' an' keep her head up to the sea. Steamboatin'! Bah, it makes me sick to think o' it."

He turned disgustedly and, taking up a glass of rum, the seventh that evening, poured it down his capacious throat.

"Come on, Pug," he said, under the gathering influence of the liquor, "come on out o' this place that encourages steamboatmen to come in. 'Tain't no place for a reg'lar sailorman. We'll go along the road an' have one more shot o' rum, then get back aboard the bark."

And leaving the valuable support of the counter the two shipmates linked arms and staggered through the doorway into the street. Together they rolled along in the darkness, the rum inside Pug MacCarthy working up a musical effect that brought forth a ribald chantey in a powerful voice that echoed through the partially deserted street, while Tops'l Haul, totally unaffected by his shipmate's vocal efforts, held a very heated debate with himself on the subject of steamboats and steamboatmen that still rankled in his mind. For some distance they made their way by short tacks towards the docks, each endeavoring to give the other his physical support. Then somehow they became separated, one of those unaccountable separations that occur under the influence of strong, Jamaica rum, and when, some minutes later, Tops'l Haul suddenly found himself wandering along alone, he tacked ship as steadily as he could and headed for the most likely place to find his friend, the nearest barroom.

He was disappointed when he found Pug wasn't there, but found solace for his absense in an affable and friendly bartender who showed a particular interest in Tops'l's discourse on steamboats and upheld his arguments thereon to the very letter. And it was right there that Tops'l Haul's practical introduction to steam began. The friendly bartender also ran a seaman's boarding house. There was an unusual shortage of sailormen, so business was bad and ships were hard put to get crews. That very day he had been approached by two shipmasters who were short of hands, and much to the disgust of both parties he had to inform them that there wasn't a man to be had.

As this situation returned to his mind, he glared at Tops'l Haul as a hungry hawk surveys a plump, chunky sparrow. Of course, it was illegal in a way; but bartenders had to live, ships had to be fully manned, and sailors would get drunk. So there was a lot of weight behind his argument to make a few pesos off the sailor. And it was all done so easily. He smiled at Tops'l and invited him to have a drink at his expense. The windjammer man accepted readily, called him his very good friend, and taking the glass of liquor that was brought from a special bottle behind the counter, drained it at a single gulp, then fell into a heavy sleep.

WHEN Tops'l next opened his eyes, it was to come out of a very realistic and unpleasant dream that he had shipped in a steamboat. He sat up in his bunk with a start, rubbed his eyes with a bunch of horny knuckles and stared around in a bewildered manner. All around him were rows and rows of bunks—not the wooden, boxlike things on the *Golden Dawn* but bunks of iron framework, and enough of them to accommodate the crew of a liner. And up on the high deckhead of the spacious place groups of electric lights blazed so brightly that he had to turn his eyes from the glare, while around a long table in the center of the deck were seated a number of strange men, apparently engaged in eating a meal.

"Why, o' course," he muttered to himself, after a spell, "I'm still dreamin', that's what it is."

The thought brought a smile of relief and without raising his head he called for his shipmate Pug MacCarthy. But Pug's familiar voice did not answer. Perhaps he was outside on the fore deck, so Tops'l called again, as loudly as his throbbing head and burning eyes would permit.

"There ain't no bloke called Pug in this ship," came a reply.

Tops'l Haul started at the sound of the strange voice; it appeared so very real and human. He grasped the iron rail of his bunk and gazed around again. There were the same rows of bunks, the same table with the same men seated around it eating a meal, and the same glaring, electric lights overhead that pained his eyes.

"Where am I?" he asked, in amazement.

"Aboard the *Almirante*," someone answered, "mail boat, bound Southampton."

As the words reached his ears, Tops'l jumped hurriedly from the bunk in which he had sat down.

"Then I ain't dreamin'," he gasped. "I *am* on a tarnation steamboat."

The hands at the table laughed and Tops'l turned on them angrily.

"Don't you sodgers crack yer faces at my misfortune," he barked, "or I'll put a kink in 'em that y' won't straighten out for months. I've been shanghaied on this pot b'ilin' machine, an' I got t' get offen her quick. Where'll I find the skipper?"

"The commander's up in his quarters," someone said, "but we advises you to go and see the chief bosun."

"Commander—chief bosun," growled Tops'l, as he listened to the words. "What'n the hell— Say, fellers," he blurted out, "I'm a windjammer man, an' I ain't wastin' no time talkin' to a chief bosun what bosses a gang o' sooge moogey sailors like y'selves, get me? I'm 'ere unlawfully, I tells y', an' I wants t' see the skipper o' this tin can so's I can get off. The *Golden Dawn*, what I belongs to, sails in a couple o' days, an' there ain't no time to lose."

"Please yourself," said one of the crowd. "You'll most likely find him on the deck below the navigating bridge, just above A Deck."

"An' where'n the hell's A Deck?"

"Find out for yourself, we ain't no tourist guides."

"I'll do that," retorted Tops'l hotly. "There ain't no part o' a ship that a windjammer man can't find. I'm a sailor, not a steamboatman," he shot out over his shoulder as he disappeared through the doorway, looking sullen and determined.

Outside, he found himself in a large, square space having the full beam of the ship, with alleyways leading off in all directions, and clusters of electric lights glaring from overhead. Men were coming and going in what seemed an almost endless procession. Bareheaded men in the short white jacket of a steward, and others in blue jumpers, and sailor's caps with the name *Almirante* in letters of gold on a narrow black band. Just for a moment did Tops'l look at them curiously, then indiscriminately choosing one of the numerous alleyways, walked along until he found further progress barred by a steel bulkhead. Hurriedly retracing his steps he tried another, walked along until it turned sharply to the left, then again to the right, then down another long passage which eventually landed him at his original point of departure. He stopped and gazed about in a bewildered way, cursed long and forcibly, then stepped in front of a white jacketed steward coming towards him.

"Say, feller," he snapped, "where's A Deck?"

The young under steward looked inquisitively at the puffed red eyes and tousled hair of the hatless Tops'l.

"Go along this alleyw'y," he said, in a pronounced cockney accent, "and when you gets to the end, cross over to the starboard side and go up the stairs which brings you on E Deck. When you gets there, walk for'rd until you comes to an iron gyte, jest parst the butcher's shop. Turn round the corner and you'll see some more stairs starin' you in the face which tykes you up to D. Walk strite along D, parst the purser's office to the steerage quarters, then turn to the left and up some more stairs to C Deck. When you gets there you'd better arsk some other bloke, 'cos I been two voy'ges in this ship and I ain't been above C Deck yet. And blime if I can see what you wants on A Deck, matey."

"'Tain't none o' yer dodgasted business," barked Tops'l as, with his brain a maze of alleyways, flights of stairs, butcher's shops, and pursers' offices, he left abruptly on his voyage of discovery.

"Just bears out what I says about these steamboatmen," he mumbled, as he rolled along the first passageway. "Two v'yages in a ship, an' ain't never been on A Deck, an' I wasn't an hour aboard the *Golden Dawn* afore I'd been from her bilge to her main truck. Two whole v'yages, and maybe that feller ain't seen daylight! Let me find the skipper so's I can get offen such a packet."

AND some fifteen minutes later, after many detours, and further inquiries which he was loathe to make from these "steamboatmen," Tops'l Haul stood blinking in the strong afternoon sun on the promenade deck of the *Almirante*. For a few moments he gazed on an entirely new and unfamiliar world, wondering which way to turn and shifting his eyes from the scores of passengers lying lazily around in steamer chairs to stare at the two huge, yellow funnels, belching out clouds of smoke that seemed thick and dense enough to walk on, until a none too gentle touch on his arm caused him to turn quickly.

"Don't y' know y' ain't allowed on this 'ere deck after six o'clock in the mornin'?" snapped out a uniformed quartermaster. "Get out of 'ere, immejitly."

Tops'l Haul glared at the man like an unfriendly bulldog.

"Keep them 'ands to yerself," he barked, "or I'll knock yer big, ugly carcass into the scuppers. I got some important business with the skipper o' this coffee kettle, so show me where he lives."

The quartermaster scratched his head as he gazed skeptically at Tops'l Haul, wondering who he was, and from where he had come.

"I don't think the commander will see ye," he said, after a considerable pause. "Whatever it is ye wants, I advises ye to see the chief bosun."

Tops'l Haul flared up angrily.

"Yer the fourth man that's told me to see the chief bosun," he shouted, "an' the next one that suggests it I'll lay out as cold as a piece o' frozen mutton. Don't ye carry a skipper on this overgrown peanut machine, or is the bosun the high muckity muck among you gang o' sailor impostors? Gosh ding my——"

"What does this man want, quartermaster?" interrupted a voice from behind.

Tops'l Haul turned to face a very austere and dignified looking officer, dressed in a spotless white suit, with black and gold epaulettes on his shoulders.

"I wants to see the skipper," put in Tops'l, before the quartermaster had time to answer, "although everybody else seems to think I wants the chief bosun."

"Who are you?" asked the officer.

"I'm Joe Pierce," answered Tops'l, "but my shipmates calls me Tops'l Haul."

"And what are you doing on the ship?"

"That's just what I wants to know, mister. I ain't quite sure how I got 'ere, but ye can bet yer life I never came aboard a steamboat on my own hook. Shanghaied, I expects, an' I wants to get off wi' the pilot. D'you happen to be the skip—er—commander o' this boat?"

The chief officer made no reply, but looking curiously at Tops'l Haul took a small, silver whistle from his pocket and blew two shrill blasts. A moment later, another uniformed man, minus the black and gold epaulettes, came up at the double and touched the peak of his cap.

"Know anything about this man, bosun?" asked the officer.

Tops'l groaned as he listened to the words.

"Seems I just got to see the bosun, no matter what happens," he muttered.

"This chap, sir," said the bosun. "He's the new hand we shipped in place of the one that went to the hospital. Carried up the gangway when he came aboard, sir. And I tried for an hour this morning to wake him up, but it was no good. Couldn't get any life into him at all, sir."

"Take him down off this deck," said the officer curtly, "and see he takes up his duties."

The bosun touched his cap again and moved towards Tops'l Haul.

"Don't ye dare to lay yer 'ands on me," shouted the latter. "I'm 'ere unlawfully, an' I'm goin' to tell the skipper so."

The bosun hesitated and looked inquiringly at the officer. There was another series of shrill blasts from his whistle, and along came the master-at-arms and the bosun's mate.

"If this man persists in remaining on this deck and demanding to see the commander, remove him below forcibly," ordered the officer, now supported by two of his juniors. "He's talking a lot of silly balderdash about getting off the ship, and we're two hundred miles out at sea."

Tops'l Haul's courage and hopes began to wane as he listened to the officer's remarks. He cast a malicious glance at the chief bosun, then gazed on the formidable array of uniforms that surrounded him, fairly screaming out authority and discipline. There was nothing for an unfortunate windjammer man to do under such circumstances but submit, and turning on his heel he was escorted below, with the master-at-arms following close in the rear.

"Don't see what you're making all the fuss about," said the bosun, as he led the way to the lower deck. "You've got a good ship, and there's many a man would jump at the chance to be in her. I've got men here that joined her when she was new, and that's three years ago this month."

"Steamboatmen," snapped back Tops'l. "Don't know the stem from the starn except that one's sharp an' the other blunt.

Fine thing for a sailorman like me to come down to, ain't it?"

"Maybe you won't find them so bad after you've been here for a while," suggested the bosun.

"An' maybe I'll find 'em worse than I thought," shot back Tops'l. "I'll never get over this in my life, not if I lives to be a hundred, I won't. An' I just hates to think what Pug MacCarthy'll say when he finds out I've been in a tarnation steamboat. I can on'y hope he never gets to know, an' ye can bet them brass buttons on yer coat that as soon as this tin can gets into port I'm off like a scalded cat for a sailin' ship."

The bosun turned his head and smiled.

"Go inside and get yourself washed up," he said, as they arrived outside the crew's quarters. "I'll have your uniform sent in and you can get yourself nicely fixed up for turning to in the morning. It's too late in the day to start you now."

"Ye needn't send one o' them monkey hats in to me," growled Tops'l. "I ain't goin' to turn meself into a steamboatman for nobody."

"Then you'll be put in the brig for disobeying orders," replied the bosun quietly.

Tops'l Haul turned quickly.

"Put me in a brig, doggone it," he shouted. "Any kind o' windbag, so long as I get out o' this packet."

"This brig ain't a vessel, me hearty. It's a name we have for the jail aboard here."

Tops'l jaw dropped.

"Ye got a jail on this steamboat?" he gasped.

"We have that. And a very nice place it's in; way down by the for'ard bilge."

The windjammer sailor looked thoroughly amazed, but after his short tour of the *Almirante* he had little reason to doubt the bosun's words.

"When do I go on watch?" Tops'l asked, moving towards the fo'c's'le door.

"You don't go on watch," answered the bosun. "You'll be a day man. And maybe, if you can prove you have good eyesight, we'll make you a lookout man by and by."

"Is—that—so!" sneered Tops'l. "An' me been keepin' a lookout for the past thirty years."

It was too much for the windjammer sailor, and with a look of disgust on his bronzed, grizzled features he went into the fo'c's'le, prepared for the worst.

THE remainder of the afternoon he spent in a listless and dejected way, reviewing his position from every possible angle, but failing dismally to find even one bright spot in the gloomy situation. Thirty odd years of windjammer life had left Tops'l Haul with an instinctive feeling of aversion towards steamboats and steamboatmen. And in the evening he turned into his bunk and fell off into a fitful sleep in which he dreamed he was back in the sixteen by twelve deckhouse of the *Golden Dawn*.

At three in the morning he was awakened with the rest of the crowd to turn out and wash decks, and as he rolled out of his bunk and donned his uniform cap and jumper for the first time, he growled incessantly.

"What's the idea o' washin' down at this time o' the mornin'?" he asked of one of the hands standing near. "Suppose it's so's ye can't tell whether ye gets the packet clean or not, eh? Steamboat fashion, on'y half doin' the job."

"Ship's got to be washed down and decks dry before the passengers start coming on deck around six o'clock," answered the man.

Tops'l Haul gave vent to a very dissatisfied grunt.

"I ain't a sailorman no more," he growled, "I'm a lackey, runnin' after a lot o' tarnation passengers. An' they dress me up like a chimpanzee to do it," he added, as with scowling brows he surveyed himself in his uniform.

He followed sullenly in the wake of the crowd as they left the fo'c's'le and made their way to the promenade deck, where he took his place with the rest and scoured the teakwood planks with a large, square stone, clamped into an iron frame at the end of a long wooden handle. It was a new and interesting method of holystoning to Tops'l Haul. In the *Golden Dawn* the crew went down on their knees and did the job thoroughly with a small stone that could be held in the hand. Whoever heard of a sailorman standing up to holystone a deck!

But it was astonishing how easily he found that big stone slid to and fro, and it was equally astonishing how quickly they traversed the length of that long promenade deck. Inside the space of two hours the crowd had been up one side and down the other, and when the bosun's mate applied a powerful stream of water from a long, rubber hose and washed off the very last grain of sand, Tops'l admitted, inwardly—after a critical survey—that the work had been well done. He noticed also that his back did not ache, his knees were not wet and stiff, neither were his finger tips skinned and painful, when the work was completed. Altogether, he thought, there may possibly be something in favor of the steamboat method of holystoning.

Certainly these steamboatmen could judge time to a nicety, for as the big bell in the crow's nest tolled off the hour of six, the rubber squeegees were just finishing the work of drying up the decks, and by the time the crowd went to breakfast the teakwood rails and white paint had been wiped down, the brass fittings polished, and the ship looked spic and span in the morning sun. And at breakfast Tops'l Haul helped himself liberally to the stewed steak and hot bread and butter that was laid out for the crew. It was a change, and no doubt an improvement, to the oatmeal and black molasses that was served out on the *Golden Dawn;* but, of course, they had to give men some inducement to sail in these steamboats.

The remainder of the day's work was very light and easy. Tightening up awnings, sweeping decks, and generally making the vessel comfortable for her passengers, was all that it consisted of. It was not the kind of sailor work that Tops'l Haul had been used to, not by far, but he could put up with it for a few days until he reached Southampton, then he'd quickly return to the heeling deck and the song of the weather braces.

But as the days went by, and the *Almirante* ploughed northward through smooth and placid seas, Tops'l Haul grew more disconsolate and ill at ease. It was the month of January, they had already crossed the equator, and he knew from experience the fierceness of those Atlantic winter gales. In the *Golden Dawn*, the north Atlantic, or that wild region off the pitch of Cape Horn, had no terrors for him. But there they had sails and sailormen. How would this steamboat stand the battering and hammering of a howling nor'-wester?

He would have felt much happier in mind had his introduction to the chief officer disclosed a man attired in rough cloth pants, shirt sleeves rolled up above the elbows displaying a pair of muscular arms liberally tattooed, and a flow of language that seemed to crystallize as it wafted through the air. This was the type of man that officered the ships Tops'l sailed in. And he knew them to be first class seamen, who could step a mast, rig a jury rudder, or heave down a ship; hard fisted, hard visaged men, who could handle a tops'l and give vent to a string of windy oaths that would subdue the toughest gale that blew. He knew those men and had faith in them, but in these stiff collared, mildly spoken, steamboat gentry he could find not one distinguishing feature of a seaman. And Tops'l Haul was anxious and worried.

AND the winter gales he dreaded were not far distant, for one day's steaming past the Island of Madeira saw the *Almirante* diving into a long, oily swell that presaged the approach of dirty weather. There was no wind at the time, but the glass was falling in a very businesslike manner and the sky was mottled with small cirrus clouds and mare's tails that gradually came closer and closer together until their edges met and formed a complete pall that stretched from horizon to horizon.

At noon the sun was totally obscured. The wide expanse of rolling waters looked dark and gloomy. Rain began to fall, lightning flashes rent the heavy, black clouds with a hissing noise, and within a few minutes the storm burst out of the northwest with a scream and a roar. The long, rolling swells were quickly changed into huge hills of seething, hissing foam which raced along with tremendous speed and charged madly at the bow of the *Almirante,* where they were cleft in two by her knife-like stem.

And as the crew finished securing things about the deck, Tops'l Haul stole away from the rest and stood in solitude watching the vessel rear her head and charge into the big combers, dashing them away from either bow with a rolling roar that could be heard above the whistling gale. And as her bows sank down in a cavernous trough and raised her powerful twin propellers partly clear of the water, he felt the heavy, shivering vibration that shook the vessel from stem to sternpost, and heard the grinding and creaking of the huge steel structure as it strained and labored in the seaway. For some moments he stood riveted to the spot, fascinated by the very fierceness of the scene.

"God!" he exclaimed, under his breath. "That grindin's enough to make a man's blood run cold. She can't stand that for long. Something's goin' to snap, an' then there ain't a thing to do but pass in the checks."

He gazed on the heaving seas and plunging bows until he could look no longer. Then, with an empty, sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach, he made his way down to the deck below, where the remainder of the hands, standing by for orders, loafed around, smoking and yarning, and looking perfectly happy and contented.

Tops'l glanced at them with a look of pity as he passed.

"Don't know the danger they're in," he muttered. "Ain't had the experience to know when a ship's strainin' herself to a point where she's likely to break in two."

And all through the long hours of the night he awoke at intervals from a fitful sleep with a feeling that something serious had happened. Then he would sit up in his bunk and wait for that shivering vibration of the vessel that told him the propellers were still doing their work. He wished for daylight, so that he could go on deck and assure himself that all was well.

But when daylight broke and he went on deck with the crowd, he found the *Almirante* still intact, bucking into a gale that was even fiercer than the night before. The creaking and grinding of the structure still continued, but it seemed to pass unnoticed by the rest of the crew. And when the bosun's mate ordered Tops'l to mop out the for'ard end of the promenade deck, he glanced at the bridge and noticed that the officer of the watch, standing comfortably behind the shelter of the heavy plate glass windows, was apparently quite unconcerned. So, evidently nothing serious had happened up to the present.

The nor'west gale was bitterly cold, and every now and again fierce squalls of hail and sleet passed over the vessel, but the deck on which Tops'l Haul was working was fitted all around with heavy glass which effectively shut out the weather, and the windjammer sailor felt very comfortable and warm.

"If these blamed steamboats could on'y be trusted, I ain't sure but what they'd be more comfortable for a man than the windbags," he argued, with himself. "Like as not, if the *Golden Dawn* was in this blow I'd be tailin' on to the braces with the water washin' round me neck, me boots full, an' not a dry stitch to put on."

Then that terrible grinding, creaking noise again reached his ears, and he swore under his breath as he vigorously applied the mop to the deck.

"No! They may be comfortable and warm and the work may be light and easy, but they just aren't safe," he told himself.

And when he had completed the work of swabbing the deck, he walked over to the port corner, and peering through the window watched the *Almirante* climb the foaming seas, and dive into the troughs, like a swooping frigate bird.

THE next moment the mop he was holding dropped from his hand onto the deck as he stepped nearer the window and stared with widening eyes across the heaving waters. Through the low visibility of a passing hail squall he could just make out the dim outline of a vessel on the port bow. Then the hail squall passed and there was a temporary brightening of the sky. As the *Almirante* shortened the distance between them, Tops'l Haul noticed something unusual in the appearance of the vessel. And as he strained his eyes and wondered if she had been sighted from the bridge, he heard the two shrill blasts of the watch officer's whistle that summoned the bosun, and felt the lessening of vibration as the *Almirante* reduced her speed.

Very soon the whole of the deck crew were mustering at the for'ard end of the promenade deck, and as Tops'l joined the group and looked up to the bridge above, he saw the captain and officers examining the vessel through their glasses, while hoist after hoist of signal flags were run up to the jumper stay where they slatted and cracked in the gale.

The course of the *Almirante* was altered so as to bring the stranger closer on the bow, and, forging her way through the seas at a slow speed, she finally stopped her engines and lay drifting at the distance of half a mile.

The bosun came down from the bridge and the hands looked at him eagerly.

"Full rigged ship *Corsair*," he informed them briefly. "Dismasted, fore hatch stove in, and boats gone. Crew want to be taken off before she goes down." Then almost in the same breath he ordered the port Number Four lifeboat to be made ready for launching.

Tops'l Haul listened, then turned and gazed sorrowfully at the distressed vessel.

"They're done for, poor devils," he said. "There ain't a boat that could live in this sea, even allowin' she were manned by good sailormen."

In a few minutes the lifeboat was stripped of her canvas cover, gripes cast off, and swung out in the davits ready for lowering. A young, smooth faced officer, clad in a long oilskin coat with a life preserver tied around his waist, called the crowd to attention.

"Men," he said, in a voice loud enough to be heard above the gale, "this is a case for volunteers. Who'll go with me in the boat and attempt the rescue of that distressed crew?"

Tops'l Haul stepped forward almost before the officer had finished speaking, and looking along the deck saw that the whole of the crowd had lined up to the call, without one single exception. There was a gratifying look on the officer's face as he walked down the line and selected eight of the number to go with him in the boat, and as Tops'l watched him tap the last man on the shoulder he felt a keen disappointment at not being one of the chosen.

"That will do, men," said the officer. "It's good to see the whole crowd volunteer, but you can't all go, so I have picked the same men that went with me to the rescue of the schooner *Emilie Isabella* last winter, in a sea almost as bad as this."

Tops'l Haul stared with amazement as he listened to the officer's remarks. He had never heard these steamboatmen mention anything about a previous rescue. And in a sea as wild as this! Well, it might be so, but he had never seen a boat launched in so fierce a sea, and he doubted if they realized the height and wildness of it, standing as they were, on the high deck of the *Almirante*.

And meanwhile, on the navigating bridge, preparations were being made to effect the rescue. The *Almirante* was being maneuvered into a position where she could steam past the distressed vessel close on her lee side. Slowly she forged along, and as Tops'l Haul leaned over the side he saw a film of oil spreading over the surface of the sea. Closer and closer they drew to the disabled ship until she was no more than two hundred yards distant on the beam, and, as a huge sea lifted her up to its dizzy crest, it seemed she would be hove bodily against the *Almirante*. Tops'l shivered as he thought of the result of such an impact. He looked anxious and cast a fleeting glance towards the bridge as another sea brought the two vessels still closer together. Then he heard the *clang, clang!* of the engine telegraphs. The *Almirante* gathered speed and passed clear. She circled round and steamed back on an opposite course, further to leeward, pumping oil into the sea as she went, until the surface of the water for a mile to leeward of the distressed vessel was covered with a film that smoothed the tops of the breaking seas in a surprising way. And into this the *Corsair* was slowly drifting.

"Man the boat," came the order from the bridge, and as the hands clambered in over the gunwale and took up their respective positions, the *Almirante* swung round on her helm and headed in for the weather side of the *Corsair*, pumping oil copiously and continuously, until she came to a standstill a short distance to windward of the other.

The order was given to lower away. In a few seconds the boat hit the water, the patent hooks of the tackle blocks released themselves, oars were shipped in their rowlocks, and at the word from the officers seated in the stern sheets, she surged away under the shelter of the high side of the steamer towards the wreck. It was hazardous work, despite the smoothing effect of the oil, and after the boat lost the lee of her parent ship there were moments when it seemed that all would be lost, as she swung in a crazy manner on the tops of the seas, and was blown broadside on by the whistling squalls. But the young officer handled her with seamanlike skill and finally swung the small craft round the stern of the *Corsair* and lay to under the lee of her quarter.

And as the *Almirante* steamed round to leeward of the wreck and lay with engines stopped, and rope ladders and lines hung over the side to the water's edge, ready to pick up the boat with her freight of human lives, the difficulties of the rescue were plainly visible from her deck. With the mass of tangled wreckage hanging from the side of the *Corsair* it was impossible to approach near enough for those on board to leap into the boat, and those on board the steamer watched with bated breath as the shipwrecked crew tried again and again to make a connection by throwing lines from the poop, but the distance was too great and their efforts were in vain. They saw the same means tried from the boat with even less success, heaving against the wind as they were.

It appeared that the only hope for those on board the sinking ship was to leap into the sea and take their chances of reaching the boat.

AS THE tension grew more and more acute, those on board the steamer saw the figure of a man stand up in the bow of the boat, take the end of a line handed by one of his shipmates and, hitching it round his waist, leap into the heaving sea. For some minutes he was lost to view. Then, after what appeared an eternity of waiting they saw him with his body half out of the water, hanging onto the side of the ship by some of the gear, while the men on the *Corsair* scrambled down and unfastened the line from his waist. It was the act of a brave man. A great cheer went up from the hundreds of passengers that lined the rails, and Tops'l Haul, his whole body aglow with admiration, swelled the chorus of voices with all the power of his lungs.

One by one the crew of the doomed ship slid down into the water and hauled themselves by means of the line towards the boat, where they were grasped by eager hands and hauled on board, wet and benumbed with cold.

The return journey to the *Almirante,* although fraught with danger in the deeply loaded boat, was accomplished without mishap, and in less than another half hour the whole of the rescued crew were safely on board, receiving the attention of the ship's surgeon and a staff of stewards. The lifeboat was hoisted up on the davits and swung inboard, the telegraphs rang down the order for full speed ahead, and swinging round on her helm, the steamer headed up to her course. She dipped her ensign to the lonely, sinking ship as she passed, then charging once more into the racing seas, proceeded on her way, creaking and groaning as before, and sending showers of half frozen spray clear over her bridge and funnels.

And that evening Tops'l Haul sat outside the fo'c's'le reflectively smoking his pipe, turning over in his mind the events of the day. Certainly these steamboatmen had surprised him, so much so, that he did not care to stay in the fo'c's'le and take part in the rehearsal of the rescue which was now being carried out by the crowd. Not only had he doubted their ability to accomplish the work, but had even doubted their willingness to make the attempt. And they had succeeded, and in a manner that was beyond the criticism of even a windjammer man. He had to admit that.

Why, one of the rescued crew had told Tops'l that afternoon that the *Corsair* was riding out the gale like a duck, until the weather backstays carried away. No one could ask more of a ship than that, and no one could prevent the backstays going, any more than they could prevent the propellers of the *Almirante* from slipping off their shafts. It was all in the fortune of the sea, and Tops'l's belief in the superiority of the windjammer had not been shaken in the least.

And for two days more the mail boat punched her way along the Portuguese coast and across the Bay of Biscay. When at the end of that time the wind dropped and the seas smoothed themselves out, Tops'l noticed with relief that everything about the ship appeared quite normal. And he had to admit it was a hard blow, one of the hardest he had been through in his thirty odd years of seafaring. But she had come through all right. And not the least remarkable thing was that he had never had cause to don his oilskin or sea boots. He had come out of the blow as dry and comfortable as he went in, the galley had not been washed out by one of the big combers, his meals had come along as regular as the clock, and he had never lost one minute of his time off duty.

IN THE meantime, as often happens after a hard blow, the light breeze veered into the east, and the sea became blanketed by a dense fog. Tops'l listened to the deep booming of the whistle and figured the time had arrived when there was work to be done. He had heard the bosun say they were in the chops of the channel, and he knew from former experience in that locality that soundings would soon begin. He had been denied the opportunity of going in the lifeboat where he would have had a chance to show his merits as a sailorman, but he would at least be able to show these steamboatmen how a deep sea lead should be cast. He'd let them hear the regular windjammer roar of "Watch, oh, watch!" as he allowed the small coil of line to slip from his fingers. And he'd be able to give them a windjammer song as they hauled back the lead from the hundred fathom mark.

And as if he had read Tops'l's thoughts, the bosun appeared round the corner of the deck and detailed him to assist in taking soundings.

"Up on the bridge there," he said. "The quartermaster will show you what to do."

Tops'l Haul shot a scornful glance over his shoulder.

"The quartermaster show me how to heave the lead!" he growled. "This is one job where Tops'l Haul gets a chance to show him how to do it."

Offended and angry he mounted the ladder to the bridge and inquired authoritatively for the lead.

"Over here," said the quartermaster, standing beside a machine with a small wire running from a reel out to the end of a long boom guyed out over the ship's side. "Just stand by and I'll tell ye what to do."

"Where's the lead?" demanded Tops'l, for the second time.

"Ain't I just told ye?" retorted the other. "It's 'ere," he added, tapping the machine with his foot.

"That thing," exclaimed Tops'l, gazing at the reel with astonishment. "D'ye mean to tell me you are goin' to hit the bottom at maybe a hundred fathoms with that bit o' seizin' wire?"

"We 'its it at a hundred and fifty, if we wants to," replied the quartermaster, confidently. "Now stand by, I'm goin' to let go," he added, releasing the brake and allowing the wire to run out with increasing speed.

Tops'l Haul stood dumbfounded, gazing at the spinning reel.

"Hold it, ye all fired idiot!" he shouted, excitedly, when he found his voice. "They ain't stopped the ship. Hold the tarnation thing, gosh dang it!"

But the quartermaster only allowed the reel to run faster. The wire went tearing out at the end of the long boom and trailed far astern of the ship, then suddenly it fell into a short bight and the quartermaster applied the brake and brought it to a standstill.

"You've made a fine mess o' it, haven't ye?" said Tops'l, scathingly, as the quartermaster lifted his eyes from the machine. "If you'd been a reg'lar sailorman you'd know better than to let go the lead with the ship goin' at this speed. Now, who'n the hell's goin' to heave in that mile o' wire?"

"We don't 'ave to stop the ship to get bottom with this machine," said the petty officer, "an' ye don't need to get yer face in a knot about 'eaving in the wire, either."

With that, he stooped down and turned a small switch. There was a hum and a burr, and the reel started to revolve at a high speed as the electric motor performed the work of heaving back the lead.

"Seventy-three and a half fathoms, white sandy bottom," sang out the quartermaster to the bridge as he measured the glass tube on the scale and examined the nature of the bottom brought up on the arming.

Tops'l Haul watched the operation with amazement.

"Ye're mighty partic'lar when ye measures to half a fathom," he said, with a strong touch of doubt and sarcasm.

"'Alf a fathom ain't nothing," replied the other. "This gadget tells ye almost to an inch. What d'you think of it?"

Tops'l rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Same as all the rest o' these new fangled gilguys ye got aboard 'ere. They're all right if ye can trust 'em," he said.

"Trust 'em! O' course ye can trust 'em. There ain't nothing to go wrong unless one o' them glass tubes breaks or the windin' motor goes on the blink."

"Ah!" exclaimed Tops'l jubilantly. "That's the trouble with all these new fangled arrangements. There's always some 'ifs' about 'em somewhere. An' likely as not they'll go wrong when we're gettin' into shoal water, then biff, up she goes on the rocks."

But for two hours, while the *Almirante* ploughed through the fog blanketed sea at her eighteen knots, Tops'l assisted the quartermaster as the little machine continued to record the depth of the ocean bed with remarkable accuracy and regularity, enabling the navigating officer to plot off the vessel's track upon the chart.

Certainly, the work of taking soundings in that cold, raw fog was much easier and more comfortable than the way they did it on the *Golden Dawn,* and that machine would take ten casts while they were taking one on the bark. Tops'l Haul felt really convinced it was a good idea. But he wished this fog would lift so that they could see where they were going. He didn't like rushing at eighteen knots through a fog so thick that they could barely make out the fo'c's'le head from the bridge.

And while he strained his eyes and tried to imagine the fog was thinning, the radio operator passed and mounted the ladder to the bridge.

"Just crossed Ushant with the Lizard, sir," he said, touching his cap.

"Give the bearings to the navigating officer," said the captain quietly.

Tops'l Haul turned and stared at the quartermaster.

"What's he talkin' about?" he asked. "I'll swear he can't see Ushant, or the Lizard, either."

"Radio bearings," answered the quartermaster. "Don't need to see any land. With them and the soundin's, and the submarine bell which we'll pick up later on, it's well impossible to lose yer way."

It was all too much for the windjammer sailor. These steamboatmen knew all about things of which he had never even heard, and, since he had been on board, there was not one thing that he learned during his thirty odd years in sail that he had found of use. In fact, he had found himself as much a greenhorn on this steamboat, among the maze of modern devices, as a steamboatman would be on his initial voyage in sail.

And the *Almirante,* her engines slowed down as she got into the traffic of the channel fairway, proceeded on her way with an almost uncanny certainty. Foghorns were heard on the bow, brought abeam, then faded out astern, as the various points of land were passed. There was no excitement; the passengers laughed and joked; and even Tops'l himself began to lose those doubts he had for the safe navigation of the vessel.

THEN early the following morning the fog rolled up like a huge screen, the atmosphere became as clear as a bell, and there, dead ahead, was the Nab light at the entrance to the Solent. A few minutes later there was swirl of yellow water under the counter of the *Almirante* as her propellers were reversed, and as Tops'l Haul gazed over the side a small boat dropped in under the bow and the burly figure of the pilot clambered up the rope ladder to the deck.

"Thick in the channel?" he asked, of the officer receiving him.

"Like a hedge," replied the officer. "But we're on time," he added very casually, glancing at his wrist watch.

That was all. The pilot climbed to the bridge, the telegraphs clanged down the order for full speed ahead, and the *Almirante* steamed through the bouyed channel on the last lap of her journey.

"How's that for steamboat navigation?" said the bosun, coming up behind Tops'l Haul and tapping him on the shoulder. "She's here, all in one piece; we've picked up a crew; you haven't had your feet wet; and we're not a minute late. What d'you think of it?"

Tops'l thought so much that he was unable to speak for the moment, and just nodded his head.

"And we do that voyage after voyage, regular as a train," added the bosun.

"Kind o' surprises me, I admits," said Tops'l in a low voice.

"Don't doubt it, me hearty. It surprised me, too, when I first came out of sail. And so it would any windjammer man."

Tops'l Haul stared in astonishment.

"Then yer a windjammer man yerself," he stammered.

"Fifteen years I put in windbags," replied the bosun, with a touch of pride in his voice, "and I don't regret it. They make a man of you, but they're out of date nowadays, so I figured I'd coil down comfortably in a steamer for the rest of my time. Now, how about making another voyage, Tops'l?"

The windjammer sailor deliberated for a few moments, then shook his head solemnly.

"I couldn't do it," he said, slowly. "I admits they're all right after what I've seen of 'em. But—but—I'd just hate t' meet Pug MacCarthy when I was steamboatin'. He'd never speak to me again."

"Rot, damned rot!" snapped the bosun. "You may not run across him for years, and when you do, you might find him steamboating, too. Now listen. The bosun's mate is going off this voyage, and I want a good man to take his place, a sailorman like yourself. What d'you say to taking the job?"

The flattery, if so it can be called, struck Tops'l Haul in the right spot. Just for a moment he studied the question, then his hard, weather-beaten features broke into a faint smile.

"Cripes!" he exclaimed. "I'll do it. An' if I meets Pug I'll duck around the corner out o' his way."

"Good," laughed the bosun. "I told the chief officer I thought you'd make a good man for the job and he's quite agreeable. So you can take up your new job as soon as we pay off."

In another hour the *Almirante* was tied up to her berth.

AND that evening Tops'l Haul went on shore for the tot of rum that he had missed for the past two weeks. The *Golden Dawn* and Pug MacCarthy had almost slipped from his memory as he rolled up the street and entered the Mariner's Arms public house, then his eyes nearly popped out of his head as he stood spellbound in the doorway and stared at the figure of his old shipmate. It was too late to draw back, for Pug was gazing at him with equal amazement, and for a few moments neither were able to speak.

Tops'l Haul was the first to recover from the shock, and loosening his grip on the swinging door, walked over towards the counter.

"Sufferin' Moses!" he stammered. "Where'n the hell 'ave you sprung from, Pug? How in the name o'——"

"How did ye get here yerself?" broke in Pug.

"Me?" replied Tops'l, fidgeting nervously on his feet. "Well, I just hates to tell ye, shipmate. But it weren't no fault o' mine, mind ye. I came in on a steamboat. Shanghaied, I was, an' never knew a thing until I was out to sea."

"Holy sailor!" exclaimed the other. "A steamboat, ye say?"

Tops'l nodded his head gloomily.

"I'm mighty glad to hear that," said Pug, with a very evident sigh of relief, "'cos I was shanghaied in one meself! Woke up one mornin' an' found meself aboard a boat called the *Almirante,* I did."

"To hell ye did!" gasped the staggered Tops'l. "That's the boat I was on. Just came in this mornin', did ye?"

Pug MacCarthy nodded, his eyes staring wide with astonishment.

"An' ye mean to say we was both on the same ship an' never knew it?" said Tops'l. "What was ye, aboard the packet?"

"A stoo'ard, by cripes!" growled Pug. "Scrubbin' floors an' fillin' water cans the whole trip. I ain't 'ardly seen daylight since we left."

"It's possible," said Tops'l, after some thought. "They tells me she carries five hundred o' a crew, an' it'd be easy to go a passage o' fifteen days an' not run across ye. But what d'ye think of 'em, Pug?"

"They ain't so bad as I thought they was, Tops'l, an' after I'd watched 'em take the crew offen that windbag I kind o' thought they wasn't desarvin' o' some o' the things we said about 'em."

Tops'l Haul gave a nod of agreement.

"An' the *Corsair's* at the bottom o' the Atlantic, while the *Almirante's* tied up in the dock," he added, significantly.

Tops'l nodded again.

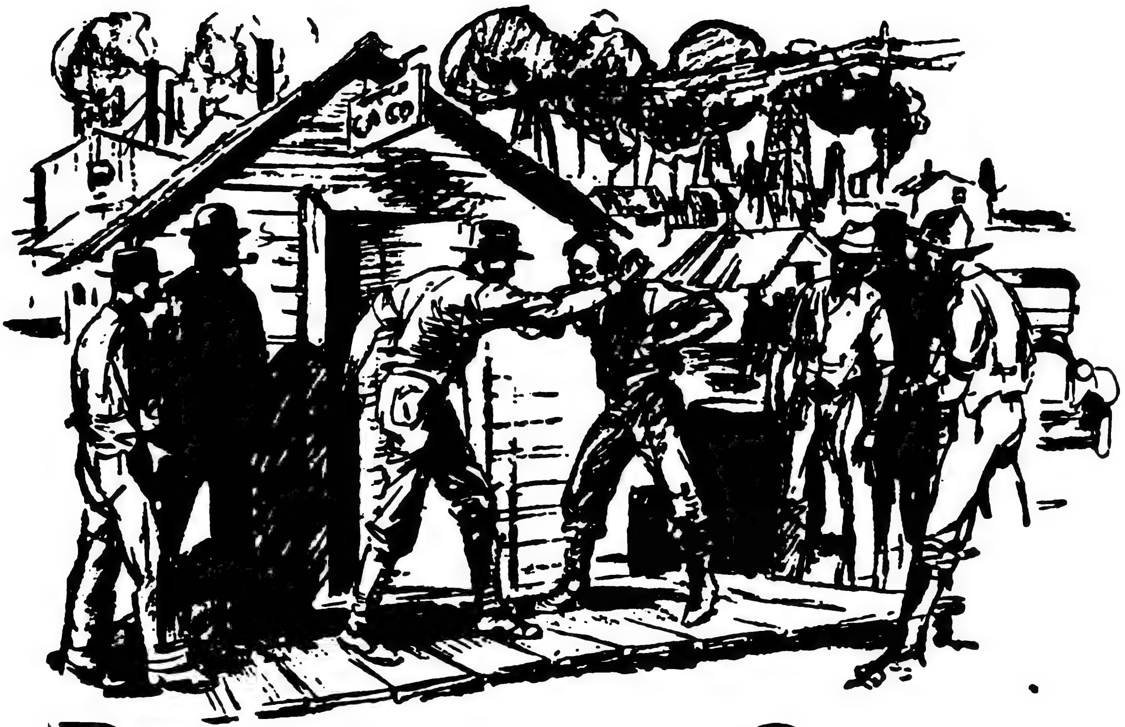
"But that dishwasher's job ain't fit for a sailorman, Tops'l. What are ye on board yerself?"

"Bosun's mate, Pug. Promoted from A. B. I was. 'Tain't a bad life, shipmate, an' I've seen some navigatin' this trip that I ain't even heard o' before. They has all kinds o' new fangled patent gadgets aboard that packet that makes it easy for a deck hand. Deep sea lead that comes back aboard itself, 'olystones with 'andles on 'em, an' a steerin' wheel that ain't one quarter the size o' the *Golden Dawn's* what ye can turn with one 'and. I seen it workin' with me own eyes, Pug. An' that's all me eye an' Peggy Martin when they says they ain't safe. They ain't on'y safe, shipmate, they're mighty comfortable as well."

For a few moments the two men looked at each other in silence, each waiting for the other to take up the lead in carrying on the conversation.

"I could get ye a job on deck, if y' wants to stay in steamboats," suggested Tops'l, with some timidity. "What d'ye say, Pug?"

And without any hesitation Pug MacCarthy said he would.



ROARING GOLD

A Yarn of the Booming Oil Towns

By RAOUL F. WHITFIELD

FREE LANE walked the rough boards of Sevine's mud, his gray, half narrowed eyes on the weather-beaten faces of the men who brushed past him. He was medium in size, with a lean, sun browned face; his lips were pressed tightly together. Free Lane was searching for a face, searching for a man. He had questions to ask of that man. They would be sharp, nasty questions. He doubted if that man, Howard Leesom, would answer them. But they would be asked.

Less than a mile from the oil boom town of Sevine was the DeHaviland plane. Bert Hallett had flown up from San Antonio with Free Lane, after they had received a wire from the chief, Cy Jones. Their own chief had let them get away. It wasn't exactly an official job; but, Free reflected grimly, it was official enough. And he had a hunch that it would be tough enough, too. That was why Bert Hallett now remained out at the ship. It would not pay to take chances.

Howard Leesom was running the town of Sevine. Free had been in town long enough to see evidences of that. Leesom and the old crowd. That would also mean Mel Dickson and Judd Berg, of course. They trailed along. Dickson, the local sheriff; Berg, the coroner.

Free thought of Joan Stacy. She had been as sure as he was right now that her brother had not been killed in an accident.

Free's hands were clenched at his sides. Ed Stacy—the man who had ridden over Texas with him, the one who had first taught him to shoot a gun decently, the one whose sister he loved—killed by a fall of casing on the platform of Leesom's well! An accident! He swore softly, fiercely. He knew the sort of "accidents" in which Howard Leesom figured. But this time . . . .

He saw his man then—the one he had been seeking for several hours. Leesom was coming along the rough boards, a swagger to his stride. Men gave him room, got out of his path. But not Free Lane. He halted, stood in the center of the boards, waited.

Leesom was almost a head taller than

Free. He came up close, before his squinted eyes widened slowly on Free, narrowed again. His body swung slightly to one side. But Free's right hand fingers caught him by the left arm.

"Looking for you, Leesom!" he stated grimly. "Got some questions——"

It happened then, suddenly, unexpectedly. With a swift, jerking movement of his body Leesom was free of his grip. All his strength was behind the crashing overhand blow of his right arm. Free Lane dodged. The fist grazed a side of his face, caught him heavily in the left shoulder, battered him back off the boards, down into the mud.

He got to his feet slowly. Already there was a crowd milling about the two of them. It was almost dusk. The boom town was crowded with riggers, leasers, hangers-on, gamblers of all types.

There was a smile on Leesom's face; not a pleasant smile. His big fists were clenched at his sides. He stood almost in the center of the rough boards, his eyes on Free Lane's. There was mud all the way back to the boards; Free would have no footing for a rush.

He moved toward the bigger man. There was red on his lips from that grazing blow; mud covered his short, leather coat, stained his khaki britches. Three feet from the deliverer of the intended knockout punch, he halted. He wiped his lips with the back of his mud stained hand. His voice was low, steady.

"What happened to Stacy, Leesom? Before your boys let that casing drop. What happened to——"

Leesom swore hoarsely, leaped forward with remarkable speed and suddenness for one of his weight. He swung his left and right, his face twisted with rage. The smile was gone from his lips.

Free Lane dropped to his knees, slashed upward with all his strength. His fist caught the wildly swinging Leesom, battered through the moving flesh of his arms, struck heavily under the bigger man's right temple. Leesom staggered off to one side, fighting to keep his balance.

In a flash Free Lane was on top of him. Lane had power in his shoulders, strength in his arms. He never let the bigger man get set. Twice he sent him down with short, straight rights. A swift, short distanced uppercut stretched Leesom flat on his back in the mud. The crowd shouted wildly. Lane, staring down at the bigger man, waited.

His gray eyes were on the bulk raising the sheepskin coat around Leesom's left armpit.

Leesom's body, braced by his hands, swung up from the hips. His eyes blinked; he stared up at Free Lane. Then, slowly, his right hand came out of the muck. Less slowly it moved toward the shoulder holster.

Free's right boot moved faster. It caught the brown flesh of Leesom's wrist, sent him down on his face with a smothered curse.

"Stick in town, Leesom!" Free's words were knife edged. "Don't try to get clear of Sevine. Not until I've looked around some. Get that? If Ed Stacy had something that you wanted . . . ."

His voice shook. Rage was striking up within Free Lane. His gray eyes were little slits as the bigger man pulled himself up again, turned his mud smeared face toward Free's. The mixed crowd was hemming them in, forming a circle about them.

"See Tex Lewis!" Leesom's voice was strained, hoarse. He was breathing heavily. "He was on the platform—when the casing got loose—he'll tell you——"

"One of *your* men!" There was a grim note in Free's voice. "I'll do my *own* looking, Leesom. You stick in town! If I want you——"

He broke off, backed suddenly through the crowd. His eyes were on Leesom's hands until there were men between him and the big man. He crossed the muddy, narrow street to the rough boards on the other side. There was no laughter behind him. Only a muttering of voices. Men would not laugh down at Leesom as they would at other beaten men. He held too much power in Sevine.

FREE LANE turned down the first road to the left. He wanted to find Cy Jones. But, too, he wanted to get back to the ship and Bert, to warn Hallett. Howard Leesom would not stop at much; if he could strike at the plane, damage it, he would not hesitate. He hated Free, because it had been the Federal man who had almost got him, less than a year ago, in the Kinglea Field. The Government had sent two men up for life, on that crooked deal, but Leesom had squirmed loose, had beaten the prosecution.

Free walked the rough, twisted road. Rigs were not so thick out here; he was within a half mile of the plane now. The town had ended abruptly. The rigs stabbed up from the semidarkness, rising like skeletons against the faint glow in the western sky. There was an edge to the wind; perhaps the beginning of a norther..

Ed Stacy—smashed out of life by an accident! Ed—struck by the fall of a length of casing! There was a grim smile, a twisted smile, on the lean face of Free Lane. Ed had been quick on his feet. Never careless. He was an old-timer around a rig platform. He had never had any use for Howard Leesom. Ed Stacy was square; so square that Free Lane had put something into Forty-Two, the well that Ed had been working.

Hating Leesom, why had Ed gone to the platform of one of his wells, more than two miles from Forty-Two? Perhaps Cy Jones could answer that one, Free thought. He would get to the ship, warn Bert Hallett to watch sharply, then return to the town.

A flivver rattled along the road behind him. There was the creaking of the nearest rig machinery, the hiss of steam in the distance. The rattle of the flivver increased. Free's right hand went to his automatic; he turned off from the road. It was almost dark. The flivver was sliding, skidding through the mud. Free's eyes tried to pick up the driver of the car, which bore no lights. He stared, then shouted wildly:

"Cy! Cy Jones!"

Brakes jerked the car down. Free had recognized the sharp features of Cy Jones, had recognized the way he habitually bent over a flivver's wheel. He straightened from his half crouched position, moved through the muck toward the battered car.

"Been looking for you, Cy," he called as he came up. "Hunted all over town for——"

He checked his words suddenly. Cy Jones was still leaning forward, both hands gripping the wheel, his face almost touching it.

"Cy!" Free was at the running board of the flivver, his hands gripped Cy's shoulders. The head moved loosely from side to side. There was blood running down from his temples, striking the hands on the wheel. "Who—who did this?"

Cy Jones moved his lips. The words were weak, forced with a final, desperate effort.

"Got me—quarter mile back. Both sides—road. Coming to . . . ."

He collapsed suddenly over the wheel, his head twisted to one side. Free Lane swore. His lips were close to Cy's face.

"Who? Leesom?" He spoke the words in a steady tone. "Leesom's men?"

Cy Jones made one attempt; and failed. His lips parted; then closed. There was a slight movement of his whole body; then, no more movement.

FREE LANE stood stiffly in the muck of the dark road. First Ed Stacy; now Cy Jones. But this was no accident. Cy had been coming toward the plane, had been coming to him, and his body had been riddled with bullets.

The creaking of rig machinery broke the silence of the darkness. A dog howled, some distance away. Free sank down on the running board of the flivver.

"First Ed Stacy. And now Cy," he muttered slowly. "What was Cy coming to tell me? Leesom's always been crooked. But there must be something big to make him——"

It wasn't close, but it brought Free to his feet instantly, drew his right hand down to his holster. A shot! In the direction of the DeHaviland. Then silence. And now another shot.

Free started to run, crouched forward. He had thought that only a few knew of the spot where he had set down the two-seater. But they had lain in wait for Cy Jones. They had pumped lead into his body as he drove down the muddy, rutted road. And now there was shooting, near the plane.

"Things—coming fast," Free muttered as he ran, fighting to keep his footing. "Ed was after something—and Cy knew what it was. And someone is afraid of me. It'll be tough—going!"

He left the road, bent low, holding his automatic fairly high in his right hand. The outline of the plane, the white of its wings, was before his eyes. He called in a low tone.

"Bert! Are you all right, Bert?"

"All right!" Bert's tone was low, steady.

Free moved toward the ship, still crouched low. He found Bert Hallett lying flat on the ground near the pup tent they had taken from the ship.

"Two shots at the ship," he informed Free. "Think one hit the engine. Fired from across the road, with a rifle. Too much distance for a revolver. I crawled into the tent for my rifle, crawled out through the back canvas. Nothing more happened. See anyone on the road?"

Free shook his head. He was breathing heavily.

Bert pressed the button of a handkerchief dimmed flashlight. He uttered a low exclamation, his eyes upon Free's face.

"You're cut!" he muttered. "What happened, Free?"

And Free Lane, lying on the ground beside Bert, spoke in a low tone, telling him what had happened.

"It looks bad, Bert. There's something big back of it. Joan Stacy had the right idea—unless I'm all wrong. It's going to be hard to find out anything. Leesom will never let up. Not after I slammed him into the mud. And he knows we're after the truth. Cy knew too much. But we'll never prove Leesom was responsible——"

He broke off. He got slowly to his feet.

"If you want to go back to San Antone, Bert, it's all right with me. I wouldn't ask——"

Bert Hallett swore sharply.

"Talk sense!" he snapped. "Where you going, Free?"

"Going to bring Cy in, Bert. Don't seem right to have him back there all alone. If I'd only met him five minutes sooner . . . You wait here."

Free Lane moved away from the DeHaviland. He shook his head slowly as he went.

Judd Berg was the coroner in Sevine. Berg had come up from the south, with Leesom. Leesom's coin had brought him up. Berg was an old wildcat man. Treacherous, playing Leesom's game, of course. But what *was* Leesom's game?

Free Lane smiled twistedly as he moved back along the road toward the battered flivver.

"They want to keep that ship on the ground. They want to keep us here—Bert and myself," he muttered. "As if all hell could drive us away—*now!*"

THEY sat in the sheriff's office, situated in a frame shack at the north end of the town. There were four of them, Leesom, his thick lips swollen from the battering of Free's fists, his dark eyes narrowed, a smile playing over his sun browned face. Mel Dickson, the sheriff, tall and angular, his eyes meeting those of Leesom too often. Judd Berg, the coroner, short and thickset, scowling at Free Lane, chewing the stub of a ragged cigar.

"As I see it, there ain't no use of runnin' around puttin' up a yell," Dickson stated suddenly. "You're enough of an oil man to know that a rig platform is a dangerous spot. Of course, Howard here, he's right sorry about that length of casing getting away from the donkey lift——"

Free laughed bitterly.

"I'm sure of that," he interrupted. "You're working hard on the Jones murder, aren't you, Sheriff?"

Dickson's squinted eyes went to Leesom's face. He nodded his long head.

"Looks like Jones got mixed up in a little gamblin' deal, an' the ones he trimmed——"

"Cy didn't gamble. Not with cards, anyway!" Free snapped. "Lessom—" his eyes met those of the bigger man— "what was Ed Stacy doing on the platform of your rig?"

"Talking business," Leesom stated. "I was buying Number Forty-Two."

Free Lane stiffened. His eyes showed the surprise he felt. He leaned forward from the bench.

"*You* own Forty-Two, Leesom?" he muttered.

The big man nodded.

"Stacy was down around thirty-five hundred, and short of cash. The Stacy-Jones five acres was up for sale. I wanted it. Stacy was over talking business."

Free's eyes were narrowed; he kept them on Leesom's. The big man had bought the Stacy-Jones hole. And there had been an "accident" and a murder, right on top of the deal. Then Leesom was speaking.

"I was in Brownsville when that casing got loose, Lane. Tex Lewis was dealing with Stacy for me."

Free nodded.

"Sure," he said in a peculiar tone. "You were in Brownsville."

The atmosphere of the small room had

suddenly changed. It had been tense before; now it was grim, too calm.

"The papers are all filed down at McIntyre's office. They're right, Lane." It was Dickson who spoke, his voice low.

"They would be," Free said slowly. "Funny, though!"

Leesom's head was stuck forward; his eyes were slits.

"What's funny?" he snapped.

Free Lane laughed harshly. He relaxed on the wooden bench. He managed a shrug of his shoulders.

"The way things break," he said quietly. "Here Ed goes and sells that five acres, rig and all. Then the casing length drops, and finishes him. And Cy Jones, working with him. He gets in a gambling mixup and they finish him off. The rig crew ducks. Lewis was dressing tools; and they tell me he's hiked for parts unknown. Don't strike any of you as funny, eh? No, it wouldn't!"

"What's eatin' you, Lane?" Dickson muttered. "You act like we were mixed up, figurin' in these killings——"

He checked himself; his face went white. Free Lane nodded his head slowly.

"In 'these killings' is right, Dickson!" he snapped. "You called the turn that time. I happen to have put up some of the coin that went into the Forty-Two hole. My name didn't show on the papers. But it's funny Ed Stacy made a deal without letting me know."

Leesom frowned.

"Seen the papers?" he asked quietly.

Free Lane nodded.

"They look perfect," he returned. "Too damned perfect!"

He saw rage strike at Leesom; the big man got to his feet, stood swaying before him. His voice was thick with rage.

"You've said enough, Lane!" he shouted. "I'll run you out of town. You and your man Grey, and that fellow out at your plane . . . ."

His voice trailed off. Free Lane smiled.

"I flew up here," Free stated slowly. "And when I go out—I'll fly out. Two shots were fired at my ship last night. Thought you men might like to know that. She's a good joy hopper, that plane. It'll take me two days to repair the damage done to the engine. I've got other things to do in town. And you won't run me out, Leesom. You won't *shoot* me out, either."

Leesom, breathing heavily, was fighting for control.

"Hell!" He spread his hands in a sudden gesture of disgust. "You'd think *we* had something to do with the passin' out of those boys! Sevine ain't no paradise, man."

Free Lane nodded his head slowly.

"Just a town where accidents break funny like," he stated grimly. "I'll have to be careful, moving around here."

The three men facing him said nothing. Free Lane turned toward the door. He heard the sharp sound of sucked-in breath, the sound of flesh striking leather. In a flash he dropped to his knees, half twisted about, his automatic drawn from the holster at his belt.

He held his fire. And Leesom held his. The bigger man was crouched forward, his gun held low in his right hand. Four men in the small office, with the beating boots of oil men pounding in from the board walks. Three men to swear that Leesom shot in self-defense.

Only that sudden drawing-in of breath, the striking of fingers against leather had warned Free Lane. Now it was an even break. Neither of them could miss at such a distance.

The muzzle of Leesom's gun was slowly lowered. His twisted face held a sneering smile now. He tossed his weapon carelessly to the cot jammed up against the far wall, and slumped down to the bench near him. Free Lane spoke first.

"In the back, eh, Leesom? Couldn't figure *that* an accident, could you? Wouldn't have to—with Dickson and Ben in here." His voice was suddenly harsh sharp. "Careful, man! There's a limi to——"

"Get out!" Leesom's voice was low rumbling. His lips twitched nervously "Get out—before I change my mind!"

Free Lane stood, gun in hand, starin down at the slumped form of Howard Leesom. Slowly his body relaxed; he returne the gun to its holster. His lips parted He was about to speak, to utter the word beating in his brain for the past forty-eigh hours. A voice sounded, outside.

"She's in! She's a gusher! Forty-Two in! Smashed the derrick all to splinters Spoutin' the black stuff sky high from the hole. . . . Where's the big boss?"

The voice was loud, joyous. The do

opened; a tall, slim individual strode into the tiny room. Others came noisily in behind him, their boots caked with mud, their voices raised in excitement. Leesom was erect, off the bench. His eyes were wide.

"Did—did she gush?" he cried, his voice pitched high.

"She raised the lid! Banged everything off topside," the tall individual replied.

Free Lane slipped out of the door, turned blindly to the right. Far ahead he saw her—a black fountain of gushing oil. He could hear her roar as she shot the liquid gold into the sky. Forty-Two! Ed Stacy's well—before his head had been crushed by a length of casing. Cy Jones' well—before his body had been riddled with bullets from a high-power rifle. Now she belonged to Howard Leesom. And she had come in a gusher!

Free Lane's lips were set in a narrow line. He knew Leesom of old; he knew the way the man worked. Slippery, and strong with hidden power. Forty-Two would give him more power than ever.

Free was thinking of Ed Stacy as he walked along. Of Joan's final words to him.

"Ed—caught by a length of falling casing!" Her voice had been broken, but there had been scorn in it, too. "He never—never died *that* way, Free!"

Free walked on. The rough board walk ended abruptly. Men were running past him, running in drunken fashion toward the distant gusher. But Free Lane plodded on, turning off at the road that led down toward the ship. His eyes were narrowed, his lips moved slowly.

"He's yellow. Yellow enough to try and shoot me in the back. And yellow enough to whine in a tight place . . . ."

BERT HALLETT crushed a cigaret carefully beneath the heel of his boot and shook his head slowly.

"Never heard of this fellow, Lewis. No particular reason why I should. A good many tool dressers hang around Texas. You say Vance Grey knows him?"

"Knows what he looks like," Free corrected. "Sat in a few red dog games with him. Says he's been working shallow field stuff lately. Fields down around San Antonio; nothing deep. Funny, too. Leesom brought him up here, and from what I can learn he started to knock him right away. Said he might have been all right where there weren't gushers, but he didn't know his stuff up here. Yet he kept him on the job, until a few hours after Ed was killed."

Free paused a moment and then went on:

"This bird Lewis—his first name is Jim, but they call him Tex—he didn't have any reputation around here. Not as a tool dresser, anyway. So he cleared out. And it seems as though Leesom figured he'd do that. I ran into Grey about a half hour ago, and he pulled me into a corner of Joe's Place. Joe tried to knife Leesom once, and the big fellow keeps out of his shack. Grey had something to tell me. Lewis is in town."

"Back in town, eh?" Bert muttered. "What next?"

Free spoke in a low voice.

"I'm making a guess, Bert," he stated. "Leesom didn't figure there would be any trouble on that 'buy' of Forty-Two. He figured that Ed was at the end of his coin, that he'd jump at his offer. Somehow, I don't think that Ed did jump at it, in spite of the looks of those papers. Then we came along, and Leesom got worried. They bumped Cy Jones off because he knew too much. They shipped Lewis out. Now they've brought him back. That's my guess. Why?"

Something in the grimness of Free's tone gave Bert Hallett the idea. He spoke swiftly.

"You mean—they're going to finish him off——"

Free shrugged his shoulders. His voice was steady. But he interrupted Bert.

"Leesom knows we flew up from San Antone. And he might worry about our flying back there. We might run into Tex Lewis, see? We might learn something. So he sends for Lewis and——"

Free stopped. He rose suddenly from the gas can on which he had been seated. A drone in the sky attracted his attention; he turned his eyes to the east. Bert followed his gaze, picked up the speck which was becoming larger with every passing second.

"Burke's plane," he stated. "He's making quite a bit of coin, flying in and out of here every day. The field reports get publicity a lot quicker. Get into the papers——"

"*Some* of 'em do!" Free muttered.

"Bert, I'm going to look up Tex Lewis. He won't want to talk—even if I find him. But he might give me an idea. I'll be back in three hours, by dusk. If I don't come back by dusk. . . ."

He paused, his eyes on the approaching plane, a faint smile playing about his lips.

"I'll come into town, and look for you," Bert put in before he could speak again.

Free shook his head.

"Don't," he advised quietly. "Stick by the D. H. As I said, if I find Lewis he may not want to talk. But he may be convinced that it'll be wise to stroll back this way. And I may be along behind him. In that case we'll need the ship."

Bert Hallett showed that he understood. But he shook his head a few seconds lated.

"You'll never get him out of Sevine. Not with Leesom's bunch on the job," he stated. "Free, don't get careless. Leesom hates your guts! You've got him just scared enough to go easy. He's a yellow rat. And he'll figure a way of getting you—and getting you right."

Free Lane lighted a pill. He watched the Burke ship nose over, glide down toward the level stretch on which it would make a stall landing. That stretch was on the opposite side of town. Burke was an old air mail pilot who hadn't made the grade in that service. He hadn't even made a go of the joy hopping game, until he'd started to play wild. The Border Patrol had a line on Burke, and he'd moved northward. Sevine, since the boom, was giving him business. Not all of it, Free guessed, was legitimate business.

"Have the ship set for the take-off, Bert," he instructed. "I'll be back. And we'll hit the air. Maybe I'll be alone. Maybe I'll have a pal with me. In either case we'll hit the air."

Bert nodded.

"Three in a ship. That'll crowd us," he muttered.

Free Lane nodded.

"It'll make it easier for you to hold a muzzle against the third party's ribs, in the rear cockpit," he said. "If there is a third party."

He walked steadily toward the town. The Burke ship was out of sight now, out of sight behind the skeleton rigs of derricks. The sun was getting down in the west. Free's right hand went to the grip of his automatic, his lips parted.

"Now, or never!" he breathed. "Else I'm playing the cards all wrong."

HE MET Vance Grey five hundred feet from the sheriff's office, and they talked hurriedly, in low voices.

"Leesom and Berg headed toward the south section, ten minutes ago. They were watching the sky as they came down the street." Grey's face was serious. "Burke's ship came in. It was coming in when they got going."

"How about Lewis?" Free questioned. "Seen him?"

"Not since Joe gave me the high sign, and I spotted Lewis going into the sheriff's office. Berg went in after him. And Dickson may be in there now. There's a back door out."

Free smiled coldly.

"Good!" he muttered. "You and I, we'll ease over and talk some with the sheriff. If he's alone when we get inside, you move out. And don't let anyone bother us from the outside."

Vance Grey nodded. He was shorter than Free, with red hair and a slight stoop to his shoulders. He seemed to relish the business ahead.

They went along the boards. Free shoved open the door and entered the sheriff's office. There was a tin basin on a shelf, in the rear, near the cot. And Dickson was washing his hands in it.

"Alone?" Free snapped, and the sheriff nodded. Grey went outside, shut the door behind him. Dickson reached for a soiled towel hanging on a hook. There was a scowl on his face.

"Thought you'd left town," he said huskily. "Funny—the way you——"

His body jerked. He stared at the automatic which had suddenly appeared in Free's hand.

"Where's Ted Lewis?" Free snapped. "Ten seconds for the right guess. We eased in here without being seen. There's a silencer on this gun. I'm starting the count. . . ."

He saw the fear registered in Dickson's eyes; saw rage die in the rising tide of it. The sheriff's hands were raised toward the soiled towel. He kept them in that position. Free's eyes went to the sheriff's khaki shirt. There was a dark spot—two of them—on the right cuff.

The automatic had no silencer attached;

that was sheer bluff. But Dickson's eyes were meeting his; they were not on the low held gun. They wavered. He was breathing heavily.

"Ain't seen him since he was fired by—"

He checked himself. Free had raised the automatic, had made a suggestive movement. Fear struck hard within Dickson.

"At the—plane," he said thickly. "He's meeting the boss—at the Burke ship."

Free nodded. His eyes held a peculiar expression. He called sharply to Vance Grey. The door opened; Grey slid inside.

"Leesom's meeting Lewis at the Burke ship! Watch Dickson. Hold him in this office——"

"You'll ride for this!" Dickson mouthed the words. "I'm an officer of——"

"Shut up!" Free snapped. "Watch him, Vance. I'm heading for the Burke plane."

Free's eyes caught the sudden gleam in those of the sheriff. Dickson had said nothing about Berg being along. And there would be Burke. Three to one, not counting on the way Lewis would swing. No wonder Dickson's eyes held that momentary glitter.

He was out of the office, his gun out of sight. He trotted down the boards, turned off in the direction of the spot where Burke had landed. The rigs were thick there; the sound of machinery, of donkey engines, of hissing steam was constant. Crews were working on the platforms; many of the wells were producing. Number Forty-Two, a mile away, was still roaring into the sky, was still dropping the liquid gold in a black, wind fanned curtain.

The sun had gone down behind an edging of dark clouds near the horizon. It was dusk already, but the rain had ceased. Free Lane trotted, trying to save his wind and yet knowing he must hurry. Even as it was, the chances were that he would be too late.

He was within a quarter of a mile of the plane when it started to roll along the soft ground. He cried out, started to run forward. Then he halted. A figure was running alongside of the wing tip; a spurt of red flashed from the rear cockpit of the ship. The report came down on the wind—the running figure toppled forward merged into the earth.

"Got him!" Free muttered. "Got Tex Lewis!"

The ship had trouble getting off; it roared over the earth for some distance. Then it was off, and climbing up into a gray, darkening sky.

Free Lane, gripping his automatic tightly in his right hand, ran forward. Crew men, from the nearest rig, were running, too. But Free was the first to reach the motionless form of the man lying on the field. He reached down and rolled the body over.

It was *not* Tex Lewis. With a bullet in its temple, the body of Judd Berg lay on the soft ground. And up into the sky climbed the death ship, flying like a gray bird into the west.

THERE were several flashing thoughts in Free's head as he turned away from the form on the field. The first was that Leesom was fleeing by air. The second was that he had murdered Berg. But flight, with his gusher not yet under control, and in the face of only weak opposition, seemed a strange move.

Free Lane turned back, listened to the words of one of the oil men.

"There was two of 'em," he was saying. "And a guy in the plane—Burke, I suppose. The two on the ground seemed to be arguing; then one of 'em pulled away, and the other bird made a grab for him as he got into the cockpit. He was shoutin' something, but I couldn't make it out. An' then the one in the back let go with some lead, and this fellow dropped. That's all I know."

Free turned away again. Men were hurrying up from rigs all around. Only *two* men on the ground. Free smiled narrowly.

"Leesom didn't come out," he muttered. "If he gets in the sheriff's office. . . ."

He thought of Vance Grey, holding a gun on Dickson. Leesom was a killer; he wouldn't hesitate to shoot. But who had shot Berg from the rear cockpit of the plane. Tex Lewis?

Free was running now; when he turned up the single street, reached the boards again, his pace slowed. There was a narrow, muddy alley running along the frame shack which Dickson used as an office. He had noted a small window on that side. He turned in at the alley, peered cautiously within the room.

It seemed empty, at first. Then, on the cot at the rear wall, he saw a figure. It was lying face downward, and the hands were cuffed behind the back. Vance Grey!

Free Lane tried the knob at the door. It moved, but the door was locked. Then, with one glance back of him, Free threw his weight against the door. It sagged, but did not open. Again he hurled himself, left shoulder forward, against the wood. This time he gained entry, was at Grey's side even as he struggled up to a sitting position. He got the handkerchief gag from Grey's mouth.

"Got me—from behind!" Grey's voice was thick. "Leesom—he used his gun butt. They're after your—plane!"

Free stiffened. He swore grimly. One swift inspection of the cuffs on Grey's wrists showed him that he was out of action temporarily. They were heavy steel, and well made. It would take a skilled man to get them off.

He stood looking down at Grey, his eyes narrowed. Suddenly his lips moved.

"Someone got Berg!" he muttered. "Leesom never went out to that Burke ship. What's the game—wreck our plane, Vance?"

Grey shook his head. He swayed on the edge of the cot.

"Leesom's been drinking," he stated thickly. "He was in a lively mood. He's flying out in the D. H.—he and Dickson. They're heading——"

"South?" Free cut in. "Who's doing the flying?"

Grey got to his feet shakily. His lips were cut, Free saw.

"Dickson's flying. He's been up with Burke. They had the thing all framed. Leesom sneered at me. Said we'd never get within a hundred miles of him, once he was up. He wasted time, bragging. If you hurry. . . ."

Free Lane turned toward the door. Grey called after him:

"I'll wire the Border Patrol. But the clouds are low. . . ."

Then Free was outside, and Grey's voice died behind him. Free's eyes held a peculiar expression. Howard Leesom had seen the net tightening, had sensed the futility of sticking it out. But what was he taking with him? Why the murder of Judd Berg? Why had he not flown out in Burke's two-seater?

Lane was traveling the muddy road toward the DeHaviland's resting place now. It was becoming darker. Bert was at the plane. Could he hold them off?

A shot sounded. There was silence, then two in rapid succession. Free Lane was nearing the ship now, but he was still too far away to see anything clearly.

FREE LANE was forced to slow down. In the last hour he had been on the go constantly. Then the roar of an exhaust drifted to his ears. They had got to it! Bert Hallett had failed. The last obstacle had been removed.

He saw the ship now; saw the trail of smoke from the great, curving exhausts. The roar of the engine was not steady; the ship had not been reeved up for two days. The engine was cold.

Free ran forward, directly on a line with the D. H.'s propeller. The slope of the engine hood would make it hard for the men to shoot at him. His automatic was ready for action.

A hundred yards ahead of the plane, crouched low, he halted. Off to the right he saw the pup tent Bert and he had used. There was no sign of Hallett. The plane's engine was roaring more smoothly now, but not smoothly enough for a take-off.

Free ran forward. He saw the helmeted head stuck out from the side of the rear cockpit, and he raised his automatic slightly and fired. Then the ship was moving toward him, gaining ground speed rapidly. He was forced to run to one side.

He dropped to his knees, gripped his right wrist with the fingers of his left hand. The plane was a moving target; not easy to hit in a vital spot. He fired three times at the engine hood.

Free fired once more and fell forward on his face. The ship was past him when he got to his knees again, stared after it. Leesom and Dickson were in the clear!

It got off the ground raggedly. It climbed with the left wing low and the engine still missing badly. There was a cry from one side; Free turned as Bert Hallett came toward him, holding a handkerchief over his left wrist.

"Leesom came up behind, with the sheriff in front of me. The second shot, from Leesom's rifle, got me in the wrist."

Free groaned. His eyes went to the plane again. It had got off the field toward the north; and now it was starting to circle. The plane was still climbing and trying to come around in a mild bank.

"He's crazy!" Free muttered grimly. "That ship wasn't tested out. He'll stall her into a slip——"

He broke off. Both men stared up. The D. H. was hanging on a wing; her air flight had carried her almost over the black gushings of the Leesom hole. Even as they watched she started to fall!

Wing to the sky, wing to the earth, with her nose whipping down from the pull of the engine weight, she fell. Red streaked back from her exhausts. She was still missing. It seemed as if she were almost directly above the fountain of black liquid.

"She's gone!" Free shouted hoarsely. "The gusher. . . ."

There was one frightful second when the upward force of that roaring oil seemed to lift the plane, toss it up. There was a terrible roar, the crashing of taut wing surfaces suddenly released, of flying wires suddenly snapped. The engine beat of the ship died. The plane vanished. Then came the explosion.

A red, flaming piece of air wreckage was blown to one side and came hurtling down toward the ground, close to the gusher. There was a second crash when it struck the soft earth of the field.

"Roaring gold," Free muttered. "Right down into it!"

The gusher was flaming now. The explosion of the plane's gas tank had set it afire. Figures were running toward the wreckage of the plane.

"We're licked," Bert muttered. "We'll never learn the truth. . . ."

Free Lane was running toward the burning oil gusher. Bert Hallett followed after him, more slowly. From the direction of the town came the wail of the fire siren. The field was swarming with men.

FREE LANE smiled wearily from the cot in the office that had once been the headquarters of Howard Leesom. Bert Hallet, his arm in a sling, sat beside him. On the bench was Vance Grey, a pair of filed handcuffs lying near him.

"Dickson talked when the doc at the emergency hospital told him his chances were pretty small," Free said quietly. "He seemed tickled that Leesom had got his in the crash. Felt the big boss was about to double-cross him. His statement means that Forty-Two'll some back where she belongs. We'll have the fire out soon. Joan Stacy owns most of her. And Cy Jones' mother won't have to worry much from now on. Dickson figured that Leesom would have got him, after they landed in Mexico."

Free lighted a pill and continued:

"He knew Ed Stacy and Cy Jones needed money to drill deeper. Through Tex Lewis he made Ed an offer. Then, when Ed went over to the rig to talk about it, Lewis dropped the price. Leesom was up in the rig. Had Tex tell Ed he was over in Brownsville. Ed turned down the dropped price offer and started to leave the rig. Leesom cut loose the length of casing, and Dickson says that Ed jumped away, but in the wrong direction. It caught him right on the head.

"Burke forged Ed's signature. They knew Cy Jones was suspicious, knew he'd wire me. So they decided to get him. Berg and Dickson did the job. Leesom made a quick deal with some shady Northern gamblers. He got some cash, and there were words over the split. We figured they brought Tex Lewis back to finish him off We were all wrong there. He *came* back, of his own accord. He wanted more money for keeping his mouth shut about the murder on the rig platform. Berg was getting cold feet, and Leesom was afraid he might squeal. So he gave Tex Lewis some coin and promised him more—to finish off Berg. He did."

Lane leaned forward on the cot, his eyes grim.

"Burke and Tex Lewis were to meet Leesom and Mel Dickson, across the line. But Dickson says that Leesom planned to double-cross them. He was pretty sure that he'd get the same dose. He had to take off with a cold engine. She didn't pick up and he started to bank around and land again. Then she slipped off on a wing and . . . ."

He stopped, spread his hands in a swift gesture. Bert Hallett smiled grimly.

"And, thanks to Vance, the Border Patrol grabbed Burke's plane," he stated cheerfully.

"Leesom was a gambler," Free Lane said slowly. "Forty-Two might have come in dry. He gambled that she wouldn't. And she gushed. He wanted oil, money—roaring gold. And in the end——"

"He got it!" Bert cut in grimly. "He didn't gamble squarely enough, Free."

Concluding a Stirring Novel of Mutiny and Romance on the Last of the Long Cruise Whalers

SEA WORTHY

By

CAPTAIN DINGLE

Preceding Events Briefly Retold

The *Cuttyhunk*, last of the deep sea whalers out of New England seaports, was fitting out for a last cruise for sperm. But old Peter Edwards, her owner, was sore at heart. For his son, Dick, refused to go to sea, disdained whaling, and no Edwards had ever before disgraced the fine family tradition of salt water sailors. Dick had good stuff in him, but he was wasting his youth at gambling and drinking.

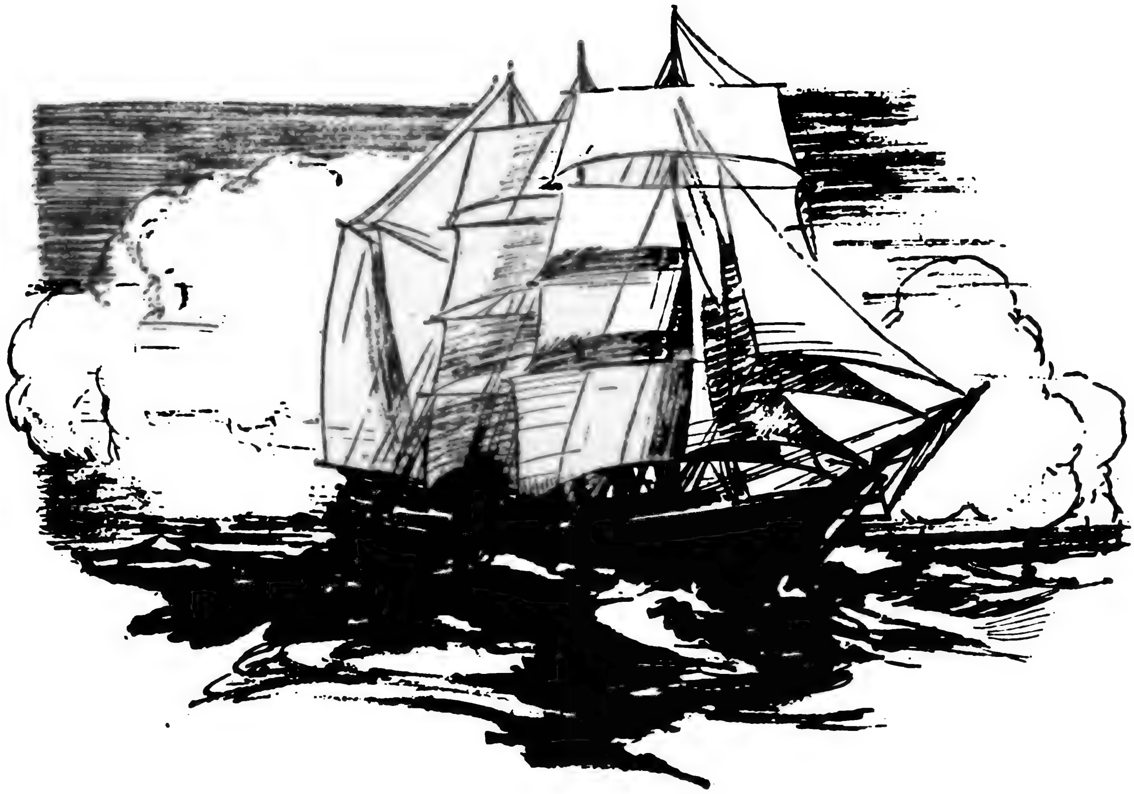
As a last resort Peter Edwards went to see Captain Turk, skipper of the whaleship, and offered him and the mate, Ben Barrett, a share apiece in the *Cuttyhunk* if they would take Dick to sea with them and bring him back a man. And so, that night Ben took two seamen with him and waylaid Dick. Dick fought like a wildcat and would have escaped but for the treachery of Yerner, a town rough who was Dick's enemy. They bundled Dick, unconscious, aboard the ship, and to repay Yerner for his treacherous help threw him in the hold, too.

When Dick awoke, the *Cuttyhunk* was far out at sea. Dick realized that he had been shanghaied and stumbled up onto deck and demanded that he be set ashore. Ben Barrett laughed at him. Dick lashed out and broke the mate's nose with a blow of his fist. Then Ben pummeled the lad until he was sick at heart and stomach.

So Ben Barrett set about making a man out of Dick Edwards. And gradually the lad got the hang of things aboard ship and began to like sails, and sea. Then one day a whale spouted near the ship and the boats were lowered. Dick jumped into Ben Barrett's boat. When they finally pulled up to the whale, Dick, in the cockiness of youth, seized a lance and drove it into the whale. And this thrust maddened the beast so that it scattered boat and crew over the sea with a sweep of its tail. When they were finally rescued by the *Cuttyhunk*, Ben humiliated Dick by spanking him.

Dick had been glad to find Yerner in a plight similar to his own. But Yerner, instead of taking to the sea like Dick, plotted rebellion and escape with the dissatisfied members of the crew. He often tried to enlist Dick's help, but Dick always turned a deaf ear. He had no love for Yerner and his kind. And now, with the Horn safely rounded, Dick set himself to study navigation while Yerner and his cronies made plans for escape. Ben Barrett mistook Dick for one of the plotters and locked him up. To Dick this was the last straw. Barrett was always hounding him. Well, he would join Yerner now! And so they plotted to seize the ship the first time three boats were lowered for whale.

One day after a terrific storm they found a canoe floating almost under the bow of the ship. And its occupant was a young girl! Taken aboard she told the captain the storm had blown her away from her island home. When the crew saw the lustrous pearl that hung about her neck



the lust for easy riches was added to their growing spirit of revolt.

June Onslow was the girl's name. She said that she had run away from the island where she lived with her uncle, in order to seek a treasure of pearls. The crew, even the mates, became obsessed with the idea of treasure hunting. Only Turk kept his head, and sailed steadily on after whale.

One day June confessed to Dick that her talk of treasure was make-believe. She promised to go tell Turk the truth. And at that moment the lookout sighted whale. But not a man of the crew answered the call to boats. Turk in a fury manned his own boat with the solid old-timers and set out after the cachalot. And when he had gone, Yerner and his gang overpowered the mates. Mutiny had at last broken.

Yerner seized all the ship's weapons and then compelled Dick to sail westward, away from Turk and his men. At sundown they sighted an island. Dick sailed the ship safely into the lagoon but put her gently on a reef just inside the entrance. The mutinous crew lowered the boats and rowed madly toward the island. Dick ran below decks and freed the mates; then he assured June that she was safe. Busily Dick and the mates set to work getting the ship off the reef.

It was not long before the mutineers discovered they had made a mistake. There was no treasure on that island. After that, Yerner's gang surrendered their weapons and returned aboard ship to give a hand in getting her off the reef.

The next morning early Turk and his men reappeared. They had rowed fifty miles to find the ship and were as mad as bulls. Turk immediately clapped Yerner's gang in irons. Then he sailed the ship out to sea and headed for June's island. But when, after weathering a hurricane, they reached the spot where June's island should have been, they found nothing but débris floating in the water. The island had sunk, and with it June's uncle. Turk consoled the girl, and told her he would take her back home with him. And then the *Cuttyhunk* got down to the business of whaling in earnest.

Due to the storm the sea was alive with whale. Turk set the mutineers free to help in the whaling. Then he promoted Dick to third mate; and this enraged Ben Barrett. For Ben could not forget tthe broken nose that Dick had given him. But Dick proved himself a skilful whaleman and a born sailor.

Soon the *Cuttykunk's* bung was filled with oil and it was time to start the long voyage home. Turk was really a sick man after the exposure he had suffered while adrift in the little whaleboat. June and Dick both tried to persuade him to put in at some port in the islands and see a doctor. But the skipper was adamant. He wanted to get home. However, they needed fresh water. So Turk sailed back to Yerner's treasure island. Here the mutineers thought to take a last desperate chance and seize the ship, but as the *Cuttyhunk* sailed into the tiny harbor, Turk covered them with his revolver while the mates put them back in irons.

CHAPTER XXVII

AN INTERRUPTED PARTY

DICK had found a fine clump of small cedars; excellent fuel for Pluto's galley stove, and for the cabin fire-place when the bitter seas of the Horn were faced. It would be winter when the *Cuttyhunk* doubled Old Stiff. His two lads sawed through the trunks and Dick trimmed the logs with an ax. The day was mild and peaceful; the fresh cedar sawdust added a strong flavor to the rich tang of the sea. Downshore a flock of birds screamed, fighting over some stranded sea food. In a clump of wild plum, fat pigs grunted and rooted, indifferent to Fate, in the person of black Pluto, even then *chee-wheeching* knife on steel.

From time to time Dick glanced shipward. Jed's men were towing the casks ashore. Ben Barrett had a boat overboard and was being pulled around the ship, slapping red lead on the chain plates, hammering down the copper here and there, where the edge showed ragged above water. Ben was making a quick job of it, as if expectant of other employment for the boat. His gruff voice could be heard clearly enough, hurrying his men along.

June ran around the rail, peeping down at Ben's boat now and then, impatiently it seemed. Dick watched her with a queer feeling of expectancy. She might be waiting for Ben to come ashore, to come with him.

"Get a move on, boys," Dick urged his sawyers. "The sooner you get that wood piled the sooner you take your ramble."

When the mate's boat grounded on the beach, Dick had his fire logs all piled ready. When June jumped from the bow, laughingly declining Ben's labored offer of his shoulder, Dick was all ready.

"I've found a fine patch of ripe prickly pears," he said. "Like 'em?"

"Oh, yes. Have you brought some?"

"Come on. I'll take you. It's a pretty spot up among the oleanders."

Dick offered her a hand, and she would have taken it.

"Never you mind sightseein' trips, young feller. Your job's here, until the wood's aboard," the mate growled. "You run along, June, and amuse yourself. Ain't nothin' to be afeared of around here now."

Ben was in earnest. And June had not the cheery impudence of her first days aboard the *Cuttyhunk*. She looked at Dick, in momentary question, then set off alone. The day was too beatific, the warm earth too sweet, to permit of the wasting of an hour. Dick was hot and furious. He had been humiliated before June and his men. And the men were grinning. But after all the mate was right. Turk had said the men might have an hour's leeway after their work was done.

The logs were loaded, and when the boat was full, leaving bare room for two men to row, the rest of the wood was rafted and towed. Then Ben took his men to help Jed's gang roll the casks into the sea. And when all was alongside the ship, all hands turned to and slung water and wood aboard. Only the fresh pork remained. And as soon as Pluto's cleaned and scalded victims were hung, and half a dozen little live pigs were temporarily styed, the crew were given their brief scamper.

"Take care of June, Mister Edwards," the skipper called out.

"I'll look after her. I took her ashore, and I guess I kin bring her aboard," snapped Barrett.

When they landed, Dick headed towards the summit of the little island where the verdure was thickest and the grass grew. That's where June would be. Most of the men ran whooping along the shore to where the wild pigs had fed on wild plums until plums doomed them to pork. A few old sailors, knowing little of shore jaunts without the accompanying lure of grog shops and bright eyes, had brought fishing lines and waded along the coral rocks on a busman's holiday. Nobody followed Dick except Ben. The men had no relish for things or places that attracted officers.

"Jest a minit, *Mister* Edwards!" snapped Ben, overhauling Dick and catching his arm as they entered the grassland.

Dick turned sharp at the tone. He saw the mate's grim face all working with pent-up wrongs. That "Mister" had all the venom of studied insult, and Ben's grip on his arm was like a steel claw.

"What's the trouble, Ben? Can't you leave a grouch behind on a day like this? I want to stretch my legs for once in comfort. I'm not sore at you, why should you be sore at me?"

They were walking on, under small trees, brushing through ragged banana groves. Ben would have stopped, but Dick had an objective; and Dick with a definite point in view was not easily stopped, short of violence.

"Never mind my grouch, or being sore," snarled Ben. "I'm goin' to have my say now. You been cocky as a steamboat fourth mate ever since you was made *Mister* Edwards. And there's a lot more I don't like about you. You're still a greenhorn as fur as you go with me."

Dick laughed indulgently. He was feeling fine. He caught sight of June through the trees. She was darting here and there, picking things from the ground. They were blossoms; or it might be prickly pears. Up there on the crest of the tiny island was a spacious greensward from which all the shore was visible, and the outer reef with its creaming surf and its riot of sea color. Dick was determined not to let Ben Barrett spoil his pleasure.

"Don't be foolish, Ben," he said. "I'm sorry if you don't like me. You may have had cause once, but you have none now, unless you're jealous of my progress. I can't help it if Captain Turk thinks I am good enough to live aft. If anybody felt sore, it ought to be Jed Roach. He told me he heard I was to change places with him homeward bound, but he wasn't sore. Why should you be? You might if I was to be shoved over your head, which isn't likely as long as you behave yourself. Lay off me, old-timer. Be yourself."

Dick walked on, head in air, for June had seen him and was waving a hand. Ben's grip fell from his arm; but it was not because of any change in purpose. Dick placidly swept the mate and his grouch from his mind, waving back at June. Ben pushed ahead of him, turned, and laid a broad palm against his chest. Dick saw now that Ben's temporary subsidence was entirely due to choking rage.

"You go—over my head?" the mate stuttered. "Blast your eyes, thet's what Turk hinted at! I'm goin' to take you aboard in sech shape you won't be fit to go over nobody's head. I'm goin' to trim you down to boy size this time, and nobody'll help you."

Dick was still pressing ahead. Ben's hand against his chest now stopped him short. That horny, broken knuckled paw was quivering. Ben's eyes glittered not a foot behind it. They stood in a small glade, and the ship lay clearly in view from it. A clump of bugainvillæ was between them and the open sward of the island crest. Men's voices could be heard in the distance. Old Jed shouted something, and June's clear voice answered. The lulling murmur of the surf and the drone of insects filled the warm air. All seemed eminently fitted for peace. And one man was able to spoil it. Dick was as stubborn now for peace as he had often been for battle. He pushed Ben's hand aside.

"Don't bother me, Ben," he said sharply, yet still with a smile. Ben thrust his hand back, doubled now into a formidable fist, but simply stopping Dick, not striking. Dick was getting angry. All he wanted was to run up there and help June pick prickly pears, and here was this scowling old shellback bent on a fight.

Dick struck the hand away now, and so strong was Ben's pressure, so sharp Dick's stroke, that the mate stumbled and all but fell. Recovering, and frothing with rage, he swung a punch at Dick's head, and Dick coolly ducked under it, refusing to hit back. And there, for thirty seconds, they stood face to face, Ben slugging blindly, and Dick ducking or stopping the punches, never trying to hit Ben, a confident grin growing on his face.

Two wandering sailors broke through the bush, and stood there pop-eyed. The mate mumbled and muttered, and slugged wildly. Dick scarcely moved his feet, but never a blow did more than brush him. Ben's fury cooled. He stepped back, conscious of his futility while in blind fury, suddenly getting a grip on his wits. And now Dick saw he was in for a fight. Old Ben Barrett blind with rage was one thing, Ben Barrett in cool earnest quite another.

"I don't want to fight you—" Dick began.

Other men had gathered around, beckoned by the first two. It was going to be rich, this battle of their officers. June and Jed were coming near, too. As Dick began to speak, he saw Ben's rugged face crack in a sort of smile of understanding. Of course Dick didn't want to fight, with all hands and that girl there to see him whipped. But Dick's speech was cut short, not by Ben. A shot rang out from the ship. It shattered the island stillness like a cannon. Birds took to the air in screaming flocks. Men looked towards the ship in alarm.

"The recall flag's flyin'!" shouted one.

"Them toughs!" yelled another.

"Ben! Dick! We be wanted aboard, I reckon!" yelled Jed Roach, bursting into view, with June running beside him all wide-eyed with alarm.

"Captain Turk's alone except for Stoll!" she cried.

To Ben Barrett's credit be it said that when his ship and his skipper were in peril, he let his personal business wait.

"Get aboard, all hands!" he shouted, and led the way to the boats. Every man was off the beach in five minutes. As they approached the ship, eyes and ears were strained. There was no sign of trouble, no sound; but neither was Turk in sight. Nobody was in sight. The men followed Ben and Dick and Jed over the side in silence, not knowing what horror they might find, or what reception awaited them.

There was nothing but a bare deck, at first. No blood. No dead men. In a moment Stoll popped up from the main hatch, with Pluto after him. Then Turk came out of the companionway, and he looked angry, not hurt.

"Hoist the boats and get up your anchor, Mister Barrett. Let's get the ship to sea."

There was no more. Just that curt order to get the ship to sea. Men grumbled. Their shore leave had been cut short. There was no weather making up. It was nothing more than the whim of a sick skipper. The boats were hoisted raggedly, and swung in and made secure. The anchor was dragged to the bows, catted, fished, and stowed. The ship slipped out through the reef, her light sails going up as she went, and until every last stitch filled to the evening breeze, a strange silence pervaded her decks. There was no cheery homeward bound chorus; no anchor song; no jesting or horseplay. Even the mates sensed something not quite right. June had spoken to Turk on coming aboard, anxiously, as if fearful that he had been suddenly taken worse. She had been curtly rebuffed; now she stood on the skids, looking as if she too were angry.

THE mates at least were soon to know what was wrong. As soon as the gear was all hung up shipshape, and the course was set, Turk abruptly told the three mates to follow him to the cabin.

"I was watchin' you all through the glass," he said. "'Twas your fault this time, Barrett. Oh, shut up! I know all about it. Now you listen to me. We're homeward bound. I ain't a well man. And be damned if I want a hurrosh among my afterguard. Jed, Mister Edwards knows a bit o' navigation. You don't. He'll have to go second mate instid o' you. 'Twon't make no difference to your lay. I want to know in case I git worse thar's one man I kin depend on to take a sight."

"Thet's what I told you to do fust off," nodded Jed Roach, happy over Dick's promotion. "Sure, it suits me."

"It don' suit me," Ben started to growl.

Turk held up his hand.

"I'll talk to you in a minute," he said. "Stay here with me. That'll do, you two."

Jed and Dick went on deck. Then Turk turned upon the mate.

"Now listen, Ben Barrett! You lay off young Dick. He ain't a greenhorn no more. He's a damn good man, and you know it. You tried your damnedest ashore thar to tease him into a scrap, and he was man enough to laugh at you."

"The consarned pup!" growled Ben. "And you make his head bigger'n it is a'ready by makin' him second mate! He ain't man enough yet, by the Great Squid! If you hadn't fired thet gun and flew thet urgent flag, I'd have whittled him down to whar he belongs. Thet's what old Peter Edwards is payin me for!"

Captain Turk slowly broke into a quiet grin. He had almost forgotten that pact with Peter Edwards.

"I won't deny that, Ben. But seems to me young Dick's purty much man size now, because of you or in spite of you. And seems to me thet was what his father wanted, ruther than havin' him shaved down. Anyway, Peter ain't payin' you to keep everlastin' after the lad until you break him. If he was, you'd lose, for you can't do that now. Dick's too much for you. He's a he man right now, and if you don't hold off him, he's likely to whittle *you* down."

"Whittle me down? Hell's Hobs! I'll believe that when he busts my nose again, Cap'n Turk. And I'll give him his chance. No man ever busted my nose before and got away without payin'."

"Seems I heard tell how Peter did once," smiled Turk. Ben flinched. "Anyway, it's my advice you leave Dick be. If anything happens to me this passage, it'd please old Peter fine now, wouldn't it, to see the ship come home with young Dick in command?"

"When Peter sees that, he'll see Ben Barrett licked, and he kin keep his greasy shares!" snorted Ben.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A SICK SKIPPER

DICK was soon called on to show his navigational ability. As soon as the islands were well astern, Yerner and his cronies were released again and kept at work. Turk told the mate to set in hand the complete scraping, polishing, and painting of every bit of iron in the ship. That alone kept Ben and the culprits too busy to think of anything else. And Turk relaxed. Once he knew his ship was safely on her long passage, with nothing ahead nearer than Cape Horn, he took to lying down often. At first he kept check on Dick's figures. After a week he felt it was no longer necessary. Dick was a born seaman. He took to navigation as he had taken to whaling.

One day when he had secured a good fix after several days of cloudy weather, he signaled a passing steamer for his correct position. He carried the resulting comparison down to the skipper in carefully hidden glee.

"Checks to two miles, sir! Our chronometer's keeping its rate, too. I got a comparison."

"That's fine, Dick. Fine," Turk said quietly. Dick peered at him. June was trying to indicate something to him by signs. The skipper was pallid, almost yellow. He smiled wanly at Dick.

"I thought you'd like to know, sir," Dick murmured, and went out of the stateroom. June followed him.

"Dick, he's very sick," she whispered. "I saw that steamer coming, and told him. I asked if he would stop her and have the doctor see him. He held me here until he heard you coming."

"I'll speak to the mate," said Dick.

He told Ben, and Ben regarded him sourly.

"What d'you want me to do?" demanded Ben.

"You ought to advise him to put in somewhere. He ought to be taken care of."

"You figger you're goin' home skipper o' this ship yet, don't you?"

"Oh, don't talk like a damned booby! You're the mate. You ought to see him. I tell you he's ill."

Turk appeared aft at that moment, stepping briskly, looking around at ship and sea, sniffing the breeze.

"Thar!" said Ben. "Thar's your sick man! You're too darn perky, *Mister* Edwards! Better pipe down."

Dick knew just how much of that breeziness was due to Turk's obstinate refusal to give in. He never forgot that glimpse he had in the stateroom. Turk was ill, and June was right.

DAYS were shorter and colder, nights held a keen tang that sent men hunting Turk's slop chest for warmer clothing as the ship made her southing. Turk let Dick issue the slops and keep the account for him; and Dick was correspondingly full of pride. This conducting of a business which was the skipper's own perquisite gave him the intimate feeling of importance that soon was magnified into a natural enough whimsy of mastership.

It was upon the bad conduct lot that the colder days and nights bore hardest. They had been told their shares had ceased to accrue when their fault was committed. There was no extra clothing for them. Yerner complained to the mate, who told him to work and stir his blood. But Ben was not as hard as he tried to make out, even towards rascals. He secretly cut up an old topgallant sail and left it where it could be stolen; then told the cooper to suggest to Yerner and his pals that old canvas made fine clothes if a man was industrious enough to sew for himself.

Indirectly that led up to trouble. One of Yerner's most useless henchmen saw no reason for sewing when others could do it so much better, and stole another man's canvas coat. There was a fight; and it ended suddenly with the owner falling to the deck bleeding from a knife stab. That was the first evidence of weapons among Yerner's lot.

"Bring 'em all aft," said Turk, when the mate reported it.

The culprits were mustered aft, and the skipper had them all searched. There were quite a few knives. When the men had been searched to the hide, and their knives taken away, Turk gave them a short, crisp speech. He gave them once and for all the choice of working their way and keeping the peace, or completing the voyage in irons. And the weather, they were assured, was going to be bad for men in irons.

"I don't know how you got them knives, but I'll find out, and the man who get 'em for you had better keep his weather eye liftin'," he concluded. "What d'you want to do, my lads?"

"I'll say something now!" barked Yerner, dragging around him Kopp and the rest. "We want to know how we stand right now. You work us like bloody horses, and we're likely to freeze for all you give a damn! We ask you what's the game when you get us home. I tell you, for all of us, we don't go to no jail! What about it?"

Turk sighed. He was standing up only through sheer will.

"You'll find out soon enough," he returned. "I'll not swap words with you. One thing's sartain, though: if you goes home in irons you'll surely go straight into jail soon's we moor. That'll be all. Turn 'em to, Mister Barrett."

When back at their jobs, Ben indulged his own ideas regarding them.

"I'll tell you birds what I'd do!" he growled. "If I was master o' this ship, you'd never have been let out of irons. You'd have et biscuit and drunk water every blasted day since you cut rough, and you'd go to jail in the end without any mincin' o' words. You'd better all hope as the skipper keeps his health!"

That didn't make the gang any more comfortable. They knew the skipper was a sick man. They drew more and more to themselves, mad and madder as the days sped by because there was nothing they could do about it. The ship was plunging along through chilly seas, and there was neither land nor hope of land that would help them. They were kept secure at night, and at work each one of them found he was placed alongside a solid man of the crew who kept a wary eye on him.

By the time the ship had come within measurable distance of the Horn, Yerner found himself leader of a gang made more desperate because of the very futility of their desperation. They never approached a boat but what they regarded its snug security of heavy weather lashings as a personal affront. They never worked beside a decent sailor without estimating the chances of turning upon him and beating him down. But like all of their kind, they were gang creatures, with very little man to man courage. They found themselves singularly helpless. They cursed Yerner by night, and only drew from him a cryptic command to wait and see; to leave it to him.

AFT, Dick was in his element. Turk had not taken to his bed entirely. He still appeared on deck each day. But now the navigation was all in Dick's hands, and daily practice was making him adept. He had no doubt any longer regarding his figures. When he took the reckoning down to the skipper one steely blue day and told him they had reached almost far enough south to clear the Horn, he did not ask advice but stated with complete assurance:

"The glass is ready, sir, but there's wind coming from the eastward. I'll haul to the south'ard a bit more while the weather's clear."

"That's right, Dick," Turk agreed. "Better make your southing sure before you have to buck an easterly. Thicker it is the wuss 'tis down south."

June was sleeping in her clothes on the settee in Turk's stateroom, and the skipper glanced at her before saying more. In his weary face was a strangely soft light as he looked at the sleeping girl. When he turned to Dick, his eyes glistened.

"Dick, that's one o' the sweetest gals Gawd almighty ever put breath into. She's a blessed angel. You look after her if we hit dirty weather. Tired out, she is, poor gal, lookin' after me."

He looked around, licking his lips, and Dick gave him the water glass feeling a little alarmed. Turk looked deathly in the bad light.

"Dick, I'm glad you come to your senses and l'arned to be a sailor. Your father was one o' the finest whalemen ever struck a whale. He'll be a proud man, Dick. You come nigh hurtin' him bad once. When you get home——"

"He thinks I'm dead by now!" said Dick harshly. "How does he know where I disappeared to that night Ben shanghaied me? That was a dirty trick! I haven't settled that score with Barrett yet, but I will, and——"

Turk was smiling. It was a wan and weary smile, but it made him seem almost well again.

"I mean to tell you something, Dick. Maybe I ought to spill it now."

The ship gave a lurch and a stagger. A log of wood fell from the grate in the cabin, and Dick ran to replace it. When he looked in again the steward was taking Turk some soup, and June was rubbing her eyes, all ready to feed him. There was a sound on deck of ropes being flung down and sail coming in. Dick went up to resume his watch. He wondered what Turk had to tell him. In half an hour he had forgotten there was anything. The mate had taken in the royals and gaff topsail. Where before there had been a steely blue sky, now a dense bank of either snow or fog was creeping over the gray sea.

CHAPTER XXIX

GROWLINGS

SNOW lay in the lee waterways. Icicles hung from yards and stays. The easterly breeze blew cold, and right in the ship's teeth, but had not hardened beyond her power to carry on under good working canvas. All work had stopped, except the infrequent trimming of sails. The iron was too cold to chip or paint. Men grumbled about the cold.

Forward, the man stabbed in the fight over a canvas coat moaned in his comfortless bunk. The chill had got into his wound, and he was afraid to go aft for attention. Stoll had been aft, whining about the pain in his shoulder, and had been given rum. He told the man to do the same. But even rum had no power to carry the fellow aft while Ben Barrett had the watch.

Dick and June ate dinner together. Dick had waited on deck while the other mates ate, trying to catch a sight of the sun for an ex-meridian latitude. He got a flying shot, and then the snow settled down in a gray pall that promised badly for future observations. But he felt confident of the ship's position. The ship stood on to the south.

"Ben was grumbling to Jed about going so far south," June said. "I was afraid he was going to bother Captain Turk about it."

Dick did not answer that; but he looked hard at the girl while he ate his pea soup. She had dark rings about her eyes, and her lips were less red. It was a subdued, weary, brave June. She saw that he was watching her and not taking much notice of what she was saying. He smiled when her eyes met his; and then she laid down her spoon and burst out into broken speech.

"I'm afraid, Dick! I think he's going to die! And it's all because of me. I feel like a murderer!"

"Hush!" Dick soothed her, reaching for her hand. "You mustn't say things like that, June. Your care of him is going to make him well. Nobody in the world could do as much for him as you are doing. Not even his own doctor or his wife. You mustn't upset yourself——"

"Oh, don't try to soothe me with words! Don't I know? If I had not come aboard none of this trouble would have happened! There would have been no silly talk of treasure, and no mutiny. They'd never have left Captain Turk to die in that boat. He'd never have had all this bother with the men. Oh, Dick, if he dies I'll feel like dying, too."

"He shan't die, June. He can't die with your care. Go and have a good rest. Undress and go to bed properly. I'll look after him until I go on watch again. Go along. You need more than just cat naps on a sofa with all your clothes on."

He helped her from the table and urged her towards her room. She obeyed him like a tired child. At her door she turned and put up her face to be kissed. It was a gesture of purest childish weariness. Dick felt almost patriarchal. He kissed her lips with reverence. He had much to think about that afternoon as he sat beside Turk, hidden by the bunk curtains, reading avidly from "The South Atlantic Pilot."

BEN BARRETT was in bitter mood when Dick relieved him in the dog-watch. The old fellow was iced from sou'wester to boots, and puffs of snow had frozen on his cheek bones. The ship still shouldered her way south-by-east, bursting a sea into spray, now and then, that thickened her already stout armor of ice.

"If you keep on to the s'uthard, you'll soon git to ice," Ben growled.

"We're not far enough east yet to stand north, Ben," Dick replied. He was not in an argumentative mood. He was thinking about Turk's condition.

"Can't you tack ship again if you runs foul o' the land?"

"It's not safe, thick like this. I've never been around the Horn in bad weather, but I've heard enough about it. We'll stand on a while longer." As the mate shook and stamped off the snow before going below Dick added: "Better step in and look at the captain, Ben. He looks very bad to me."

"That's what I'm goin' to do!" snapped Ben, and tramped down the stairs.

Ben entered the skipper's room just as he was, all bundled up in clothes and wet with melting snow. He made a little puddle on the carpet, standing there trying to discern Turk in the dull light.

"'Lo, Ben. What's the good word?" Turk said. Ben was shocked at the voice. It sounded as if the steam behind it was very low in the gauge. Instead of making him adjust his own voice, that sigh of weakness in Turk only strengthened the mate's resolve to have a showdown.

"Good words is scarce," he growled. "You're down here on your back; purty middlin', I should say. Thet young squirt, Dick, claims you've sot him to navigatin' and left it all in his fist. Do you know the ship's 'most froze up? He's still standin' south. I'm only fust mate aboard o' this hooker, Cap'n Turk. Might as well be galley swab fur's I kin see."

Turk moved restlessly on his bed. He tried to reach his water glass. Ben handed it to him, and received another shock. The skipper's hand was little more than a fleshless claw.

"Ben, why do you keep everlastin' after young Dick?"

"The cocky monkey's puttin' on dog afore he's 'arned the right, thet's why! How come, me, nigh forty year whalin', has to stand by and sail a traverse set by a youngster as never smelt salt water until this v'yage?"

Ben turned and stumbled across the room, but not out. Oh no! He had more to say.

"I tell you, Cap'n Turk, jest as man to man, you better not slip your cable if you're so fond o' Dick Edwards. He'll smell hell all right if I ever takes holt!"

"Ben, I always found you a good mate," Turk said with strange quiet.

"So I am! So I allus was!" snapped Ben. "It's you as is bent on makin' me a dadburned fool!"

"I ain't aimin' to, Ben." Turk turned in pain, biting on a groan. "You've done well by Dick. You made a man out of him. And because he's a man I'm easy in my mind now about the ship. He's that much of a man he'll need no certif'cate when his dad sees him. I'm feelin' purty mean, Ben. Reckon maybe I might brace up and git around ag'in if I kin rest comfortable here a while until we hit warmer weather. Why can't——"

"Warmer weather! Hobs o' hell, Cap'n, do you expect to strike warmer weather headin' t'wards the blasted pole?"

"Dick's right in that!" A spark of impatience sharpened Turk's retort. "Headwinds and snow and thick weather is the time to keep clear o' Stiff. You knows that, Ben Barrett. Why can't you sail the ship and leave Dick navigate? He ain't puttin' himself above your head in handlin' the ship, is he?"

"He knows better'n that!"

"Then you ought to be able to agree. What makes you hate the boy this way? You had a likin' for him once."

"Who said I hated him?" Ben cried angrily. "He ain't got a better friend than me, and you knows it!"

"You show it mighty queer."

"I'll show it any way thet suits me, Cap'n Turk, until——"

"Still chawin' on thet bargain with old Peter? Forget it. I've told you many times you've done all you can. The lad's man size and beyond you, Ben."

"You ain't seen the perky grin he gives me every time he sets course!"

"Thet's the boy in him."

"Well, as long as the boy's in him I'll keep after him. When I've licked thet grin off his mug, and he kin call me Mister Barrett without all hands knowin' he's laughin' at me, I'll be proud to give Dick Edwards my flipper and call my busted snoot paid fer in full. And don't you yammer no more about me hatin' the lad. If I hated him, he'd be shark meat long ago!" Ben turned at the door in leaving, to say: "Hope you soon feel easier, Cap'n."

"Thank you, Ben. Jest tell Dick to look in when he comes below. I want to tell him somethin'. No hurry. Oh, Ben, before you peel your wet duds off, pass the word to Yerner I want to see him. No use carryin' a grievance out o' reason."

THE mate knew now how ill Turk was. But he passed the word, and sent Yerner aft. He stayed forward talking to the carpenter for a while, but Dick and Jed were aft to see that Yerner got into no mischief.

Dick saw Yerner duck below and would have questioned him had he not seen the mate give the order. Yerner wore a grin as he went by the skylight. Obviously he believed he had been singled out by Turk for special treatment. Perhaps for reinstatement. Dick looked through the skylight glass. He could see most of the stateroom doors. Yerner did not pass by the skipper's door. He could have no other business down there. The pantry was forward of that. The steward had not yet come aft to prepare supper, though it was about time. Dick had a suspicion that Yerner was seizing a fine opportunity to snoop for cabin food. He glanced around at sea and sky; along the decks; gave a word to the helmsman to keep a keen lookout, then quietly stepped below.

He saw nothing for a moment, coming into the dim cabin. But he heard a scuffling. It was in the pantry. Just as he suspected. He reached the door of the tiny place in two jumps, and filled the doorway with his body. Yerner was there. So was June. He had her in his arms, smothering her indignant outcry with lecherous kisses. She beat at his face with strong hands, but he had the strength of sudden flaming lust and the courage of unexpected opportunity.

Dick uttered no word. He reached, gripped, and hauled Yerner out, dragging June in that vicious hug, too. There was no pretence of sportsmanship in Dick's attack. He twisted Yerner's arms free of the girl's writhing body, and backed the fellow against the bulkhead. Then he thrust a knee up, pinning Yerner, and drove short, cutting punches into the snarling face until the snarl was cut and beaten into a whine. Twice Yerner dropped through his hold; twice Dick hauled him up to hammer him again. When the man flung all manhood to the wind and started crying from pain and fright, Dick dragged him to the stairs, booted him up them, and hurled him out onto the frozen deck.

"Did thet feller Yerner come down yet," the skipper asked June when she went in, trying to conceal her agitation.

"He came down, but Dick sent him up again I think," she said.

"Stick your purty head out and tell Dick I want Yerner jest a minute."

She did so. Dick passed the word. Ben Barrett was staring at Yerner's ribboned face, wondering what sort of sick skipper had done that.

"I thought I told you the skipper wanted you," he growled.

"Tell him I ain't coming!" sobbed Yerner.

CHAPTER XXX

ICE!

THE ship was put on the other tack in the middle watch. The lookout had reported ice to leeward. Little cakes tinkled alongside. Hogg, working well, trying his best to redeem himself, was a good ice detector. He stood a bitter lookout in the foretop for a full four-hour watch. It was he, coming down for hot coffee, almost stiff with cold, who surprised Stoll and Yerner at the larboard bow boat. They were unlashing the heavy weather gripes and leaving the boat fast by simple hitches only. Yerner ran like a rat when Hogg dropped out of the fore rigging right beside him. Stoll, less beaten, tackled Hogg with a confident assumption that his one time afterguard comrade would be a good sport. Hogg was a good sport. He was playing the game for his ship. He took Stoll in a deep water grip and shoved him against the boat.

"Go to work now and gripe her up again," he growled. "What's the big idea, anyway?"

"Hell! You don't think we're goin' home to get jailed?" snapped Stoll. "If we do, you're in it too. Be a sport. He's standin' up t'wards the land, ain't he? We're goin' to take a chance in a boat before he gets a chance to clap us in the jug."

"Go on, gripe her up!" said Hogg. He was chilled through after four hours aloft in the bitter night, but he meant to stand over Stoll until that boat was fast. "I'm willin' to take my chance at home," he said. "Until we get there, I'm for the ship, if I am only a fo'c'sle hand. Get busy. If Ben Barrett ketches you foolin' with a boat he'll——"

"To hell with Barrett! You, too! Wait till I tell the gang who stopped our game. You'll smell seven kinds of hell."

"All right. Make that boat fast, that'll be all. And I'm watchin' you, and the gang, too."

Another day broke. A blizzard blotted out the sky. The sea leaped viciously. There was a whip to the wind that staggered the old ship and kept her decks streaming with icy water. Small floes of ice clashed at her blunt bows; not dangerous yet, for she had stout sheathing at the stem that could stand heavier ice than that. But occasionally a small berg loomed out of the murk; and that was disquieting.

It was when the bergs sailed past that Dick realized how valuable experience might be. He was glad to see old Ben Barrett take hold of the sailing of the ship like a thorough seaman. Dick was keeping track of the course and distance run, and knew within a few miles where the land might be. Unless that ice grew into something much heavier to windward, preventing the tacking of the ship to the southward again, all was well. If bergs closed in to the south when the land was close aboard to the northward, the only thing for the ship's safety would be to turn and run west. That was not to be thought of except as a final recourse. Captain Turk must be got ashore as quickly as possible. He was in bad shape. Even the mate had condescended to tell Dick he was afraid the Old Man was slipping his cable.

June had been crying softly all morning. Turk scarcely breathed. He did not open his eyes now when anybody went in. Dick had studied old logs and recent "Pilots" until he came to the conclusion that the only thing that could save the skipper was to run in to the Falklands and put him in a hospital at once. That meant that the ship must hold on in the teeth of the rising gales, hedged in by the devil of the Horn on one side, and the deep sea of icebergs on the other. It would be a piece of luck, even with the best of contrivance, to weather the Horn. Once let them turn and run west, and they would surely bury Captain Turk in bitter seas which gave even dead men no rest.

"She ain't doin' her best with them t'gallant s'ls," the mate remarked, peering anxiously aloft. The long topgallant masts were whipping in the plunges.

"We can't ease her, Ben, if she's to work to windward," Dick replied. He felt warm at Ben's attitude. He believed the grim old fellow meant to work smoothly with him.

"You won't do the skipper any good by wreckin' his ship on Cape Stiff!"

"We won't wreck her, Ben. But we can't run her off. And if we run back you can bid Captain Turk good-by. Can't the men stretch an extra backstay or two? It'd keep 'em warm and stop their grumbling."

"You leave the workin' of the ship to me!" snapped Ben with his old savagery. He glared into Dick's face as he spoke; but he leaned to the wind and plunged forward. Soon his rusty bellow was starting men from cozy corners; dark shapes moved among the whirling snow aloft. The mate drove them pitilessly, working out on them the spleen aroused by the admission that Dick's suggestion was a good one.

TOWARDS evening the ice was heavier. The reckoning set the ship close to the land. Hogg was aloft again. He had made no single attempt to plead for reinstatement. He was playing the game like a good sailorman who has been foolish and knows it, letting actions speak for him. Jed Roach was sniffing the wind for hours past, unerringly reporting ice by scent almost as quickly as Hogg reported it from aloft by sight above the thickness or the sound of seas breaking against it. Ben Barrett had not been below all day, except to eat hurriedly. He kept growling about the land. Dick was getting uneasy, too. He believed his reckoning was true; that the ship was sufficiently to windward to weather the Cape on that tack. But there was a doubt; and he was torn between the uncertainty of inexperience and the courage of youth. Without any doubt at all, if the ship had to go about now she must turn and run. Ice lay heavy to seaward. She dare not tack that way. Land lay to the northward and westward, he hoped; if he had reckoned rightly they would just clear the Horn without tacking. If she could carry sail enough!

Twice had the mate insisted that the topgallant sails must come in or the spars go. Dick had insisted that they hold on to them. They had reefed the foresail and mizzen topgallant sail, and if sail were taken in after that it was all up with windward work in that wind and sea. The crew huddled about wherever they found a lee. The gang of rebels stayed in a close bunch in the forepeak for warmth. Body warmth was all they had, and the breath of scared mutterings.

"I smell ice close to!" bawled Jed suddenly.

"Tall berg on weather bow!" yelled Hogg from aloft.

"Run her off!" barked Ben, turning to the helmsman and reaching out to the wheel. Dick stayed his hand.

"Hold your course!" he snapped. "Sing out, Hogg! D'you see it, Jed?"

Like a white ghost of leering doom the berg slid out of the white swirls to windward and breathed a chilly breath on the ship. Seas leaped at its flanks. It rolled and twisted. But it missed the *Cuttyhunk*, and that was enough.

"Keep her full and by," Dick ordered the helmsman, and wondered at his own coolness. Seasoned old Jed Roach even looked staggered when that icy monster danced past.

"Dyin' or not, I'm goin' to see if Turk'll stand fer this!" swore Barrett, and blundered off down the companionway. "He's a sight better off dead than jest waitin' to be drowned! If he wuz dead, I'd be able to save his ship for his missus anyhow!" He shouted that back at Dick as he descended.

He was back in a few minutes.

"You better go down. He don't know me. June says he's been askin' arter you an hour past, but she thought he was ramblin'. 'Tis all he says. Dick, jest Dick. You'd think he was your dad!"

"I'll see what he wants. Don't let her fall any to loo'ard. I have a feeling we're closing in on the land."

"Don't you tell me what to do!" snarled Ben. "I've stood about enough from you."

"Well, don't forget there's ice to windward, too."

Dick was uneasy about leaving the deck. Ever since he had taken June from Yerner's arms he had felt tremendously bucked in importance. The mate's seeming resignation to the situation helped, too. Ben had not worn that disguise long, truly, but long enough for Dick to get the feeling of actual command well rooted on him. The tone he used in that last remark, leaving the deck, was well calculated to let Ben Barrett know that Captain Turk still held the deck by proxy, and that proxy was Dick Edwards. It was Ben's change of attitude ever since those preventer backstays were fitted which gave Dick that uneasy feeling as he went below.

THE moment he stepped into Turk's room all other considerations were forgotten. June sat under the swinging lamp deeply immersed in the ship's medicine chest instruction book. The steward wandered around the outer chain like a lost soul.

"I've given him the last of his medicine, Dick, and I don't know what to do," whispered June. "He scarcely breathes. He's cold."

Dick leaned over the bunk. Turk seemed to know he was there, though he never opened his eyes. He felt for Dick's hand and his thin, cold fingers fastened on it, drawing Dick to him.

"Dick, I'm slippin' my cable," he murmured. "Reckon I carried on too long."

"Don't say that, sir," Dick said hurriedly. "We'll have you into Port Stanley in no time! We're weathering Old Stiff in fine style."

"You may, but I won't. I know when my shackle's loose. You and Ben must work together. My share's all my missus'll have, Dick. Ben's the finest sailorman afloat, but he's afraid of a sextant. I depend on you—" There was a dry, hacking interruption. Turk quivered along the length of him. "I depend on you, Dick, to get the ship—the ship—home." Another chocking interruption, then: "I've wrote in the log about June. My missus'll take care of her. And there's somethin' I want to say Dick, about Ben keepin' arter you. It's—it was all your. . . ."

Turk was silent. Dick leaned low over him. There was some message still unsaid. The fingers that clutched his hand had no feeling of life. June crept to the bunkside. The steward, from out in the cabin, sensed something that Dick had not yet grasped, and stepped forward, peering into the face so long familiar to him. Silently he drew the blankets over the skipper's face.

"We never knowed what was wrong with him before, Mister Edwards; but we do now," he said solemnly.

Dick stood for a moment bewildered. The stateroom was so quiet; the uproar of the crashing seas outside appeared to be shut out by some mysterious agency. Soon he was to realize that death gave that impression—at least, death in a bed. He took June's hand, comforting her. She was so utterly alone now. She cried softly against his wet oilskin, and he patted her head.

"Don't cry, June. I'll look after you. We'll soon have you home. Just leave the steward to take charge here. I have to go up now, but I'll come down again soon. Steward, shall I send Chips down to help you?"

"If you please, Mister Dick. You give your orders. I heard Captain Turk tell you he decided on you to git the ship home, sir. I allus have respected his wishes for nigh thirty year."

Dick ran up the stairs. He was full of a queer sense of dual being. He felt sorry about Turk's death. That was natural, for Turk had been decent to him. But it went no farther than the grief of youth for somebody less than a near relative. It would have been unnatural in youth at full tide to feel deeper grief than that. The paramount feeling that animated Dick as he bounded out on deck, almost falling to a heavy lurch of the ship, was that the captain was dead, and the command devolved automatically upon the next ranking officer. That was Ben Barrett. But Turk had said, almost with his dying breath, that he depended on Dick to get the ship home. If Ben chose to work hand in hand with him, there need be no fuss. If not . . . That was not the proper spirit to approach Ben in. Of course Ben would swing in and make the passage as comfortable as possible. Dick would carry on as he had been doing, unless Ben took it on himself to start trouble. Meanwhile the ship needed full attention.

A squall whistled in the rigging. Snow flew blindingly. There was a different heave to the sea, as if a sudden change had taken place in the nature or the soundings of the ocean bottom under keel. Vaguely through the driving snow could be seen the stout, squat figure of Hogg, sitting on the foreroyal yard like a lump of frozen snow. Jed had gone as far as the mizzen yard, and was listening and smelling out to the northward.

"Thar's breakers, or big ice to loo'ard!" he yelled as Dick got upright.

"Berg and growlers abeam to windward!" thundered Hogg.

"It's land! High land! 'Most on the lee quarter!" shrieked Jed. Ben Barrett shoved aside the lee helmsman, seized the spokes, and bellowed:

"Ready about! For'ard thar! Roach, you come down like smoke. Rouse out all hands! Ease your hellum, you! What the hell're you keepin' her off for?"

"Hold on all!" yelled Dick, suddenly furious. He snatched the mate's hand from the wheel, savagely bade the helmsman hold his course, and shouted to Jed, now on the skids: "Jed, brace her up sharp's you can. Quick! She's got to weather that land!"

Men stood by, undecided in the conflict of orders. Only the helmsman knew what to do. He held his course. And while Dick was still shouting, Ben Barrett turned upon him in a cold rage.

"Consarn you! You've had your last say, my buck!" He reached for Dick.

"Stop it! This is no time! Captain Turk's dead—" Dick began to say. Ben heard that much, and that was enough.

"Then you're finished aft! You git for'ard, where you belong."

"I'm taking this ship home!" Dick stated crisply, and in that instant of emergency flung all uncertainties overboard and took the plunge. He would see once for all what Ben Barrett had. Ben meant to show him, without delay. He rushed Dick, and they grappled in a screaming blast of snow laden wind that hove the ship down to her channels and drove her like a frightened creature of life through the leaping seas.

"Ice on weather bow!" yelled Hogg in a stentorian voice.

CHAPTER XXXI

RECKONING

BEN struck Dick solidly on the forehead, and the blow, with the motion of the ship, almost upset both. Dick felt for a foothold, dodging the mate's fist flurries. It was no time for fighting, he knew. But the ship could only win clear of that menace of Old Stiff and the ice by weathering all she was able to. Turk had died in the hope that his ship would reach home safely. Dick knew that hope was doomed to die right there if the ship tacked into the southward ice. And perhaps, above all, there was the unsettled question between him and the mate.

"Come and watch the steering, Jed!" he yelled, then Ben's swinging left caught him on the cheek bone and turned everything to fire. Blindly fighting off the charging mate, trying to see him, Dick punched straight out and a lurch sent Ben hard against the punch. It dropped him in a rolling heap beside the potato locker.

"Consarn you! You've busted my nose again!" snuffled Ben, shaking his head like a bear as he knelt, peering up at Dick through shaggy brows. He watched cunningly, rising when the ship lurched to his advantage; and he was on top of Dick with a flurry of fists as the cry pealed from aloft:

"Heavy ice close to starboard!"

Ben snuffled, his nose streaming blood. And he hit out fiercely, driving Dick across the deck, himself apparently shedding Dick's wallops like water. But Dick was punching hard, and straight, and only sheer fighting frenzy carried Ben forward. Dick landed a short right to the chin that traveled six inches, and toppled Ben almost over the wheel. The helmsman shoved him off with a curse. It was stunt enough to hold the ship to her course and watch a good fight at the same time, without having to boost the fighters back into the ring.

"Breakers on lee quarter!" yelled Jed, standing at the rail abreast of the wheel. Jed was dancing with anxiety all the time his superiors were fighting. Well he might. There lay the grim outposts of the Horn. The ship was doing well, but she had yet to slide past those breakers. He knew, as all Cape Horners knew, that to see breaking water around Old Stiff itself, anywhere to the eastward of the Ramirez, meant that the ship was too close for anybody's health.

Ben was back again, flailing desperately. Dick felt a change; the mate's punch had lost weight and sting. But a roundhouse thump split Dick's eyebrow; and another in the body made him feel as if he had swallowed a hot flatiron. Dick tautened his stomach and stepped in, trying to plant one jolt that would end it. He was scared for the ship's safety.

"Hey, you! Git away from thet thar boat! Chips! Git forward and stop them fellers!" Jed Roach suddenly yelled.

Dim figures moving like shadows in the snow mobbed about the larboard bow boat. Jed bawled at Dick and Ben to know if they meant to wreck the ship and lose a boat. Jed was rattled and knew it.

"Quit, Ben!" panted Dick. "Call it off."

"When you hollers enough!" snuffled Ben, and struck out wildly again, cutting Dick's lips. That made Dick taste blood, and he was coldly serious. With a jarring left he popped Ben's head back; with a right hook to the chin he set Ben on his heels; and another right with his weight under it drove Ben's head against the potato locker and dropped him cold.

"All right, Jed! Get for'ard and help Chips!" Dick shouted. "It's Yerner's lot, isn't it? Help Chips put the irons on 'em, the darn fools!"

He felt victory surging up inside him until it threatened to stop his heartbeats. He snatched a glance at the land, and out upon the gray sea. There was Hogg, swarming down the rigging to help master the mad mob at the boat. None but madmen would think of stealing a boat there in the welter of icy seas and with the Horn to leeward. But Yerner's gang were madmen at the moment.

Then there was Ben Barrett, already stumbling to his feet, shaking his head again, like a bear. And Dick wondered just what Ben would do next. From what he had seen of the mate, a mere knockout would scarcely convince him that he was whipped. Sure enough, the mate was coming towards him, crouched. Dick had been about to take the wheel, letting the helmsman go forward to help. Now he stopped, his hand outstretched towards the spokes.

Ben seemed to find difficulty in seeing. He weaved a bit; but he found Dick's arm, and felt along it until he got hold of Dick's fist. Dick was alert for an instant, fearing some hitherto untried trick of deep water manhandling; but Ben only gripped his hand, gripped it hard, and looked up into Dick's face with a battered and bloody grin.

"You win, young Dick!" he snuffled. "You're too good a man fer Ben Barrett, whether 'twas me made you over or not. Give your orders, son. Leave the work to me."

"Then go and stop Yerner. He's lowering a boat!" grinned Dick, as happy as a shark full of sailors.

Ben plunged forward without a word, Hogg dropped out of the rigging on top of Stoll, and Jed was leading Chips and the cooper and the smith into the riot at the rail. Dick could watch it all now. He could feel the thrill and leap of the stressed ship under him. He could feel his own pulses leap to the grandeur of her battle, and his heart was warm to see the old ship slowly but surely thrash her windward way out past that snarling devil of Old Cape Stiff. Once let her put that frowning pinnacle of sea fretted rock astern, and he could ease her off and run through the Strait of Le Maire with yards checked in.

"Them fellers must have some good idee what's comin' to 'em at hum, to risk boatwork in a place like this," the helmsman said with a shudder.

"They're crazy!" Dick returned. "They'll never get clear of the ship's side in this sea, if they do get the boat lowered. Watch her, there! Watch your steering, never mind the boat!"

The ship suddenly came to a more upright angle as the helmsman, curious about the boat, let her luff. It checked her way, too; and she fell off slowly, and dangerously to leeward, before she gathered full headway again. Dick leaped to the lee rail, every muscle at tension, every nerve taut, agonizingly scanning that boiling surf to leeward. If she failed now, it would be because of the helmsman's interest in that boat. The failure would be none the less fatal because of the cause. Turk, lying dead below, must know he had failed, Dick imagined. And there was nothing to be done. Nothing to be done for the ship and those damned lunatics fighting for the privilege of committing suicide in a whaleboat.

"Here, give me the helm!" he snapped, striding over and taking the wheel. "Go and help the mate. You're fitter for that than for steering!"

That was the first real indication of mastership in Dick Edwards. He had got his ship into a tough spot; he would get her out of it or meet disaster on his own single responsibility. He set his teeth as he gripped the wheel. Nothing but steering and bowels could answer now. As far as he was concerned, there was no boat, no Yerner, nothing at all but the battling ship, the death to leeward, and himself between. There was no ice lookout. He shut his mind to ice. It tinkled along the ship's sides, but he refused to hear it. Only one thing could get the ship past Stiff, and that was cool helmsmanship.

BUT though he shut things out, those things still existed. Yerner and Stoll and Kopp, leaders of the disgraced gang, meant to take that boat and quit the ship. There lay land, bleak and iron hard. Never again, until she headed in for home, would the *Cuttyhunk* be so near to a shore. And here were no policeman. No jails. Yerner believed that Turk meant to jail them all; and news of Turk's death had not yet gone forward. There was fighting around the boat; but that boat was surely swinging out.

When Hogg dropped on top of Stoll, it was at once a case of professional pride on Hogg's part and unprofessional resentment on Stoll's. Though disgraced himself, Hogg remained at heart a member of the afterguard. And Stoll was a traitor to his cloth. Instead of seeing his error, and trying to redeem himself, Stoll threw in his lot with mutineers and wharf rats. Hogg once earned the name of "Bully." Now he acted the part on Stoll. He knocked all the wind out of Stoll when he fell on him, and while he had him down went to work on him and pounded him to helplessness. Then he left him lying in the trodden snow to help the others.

Yerner and Kopp set their backs against the rail and fought like badgers to hold off Jed and Chips while their pals started the boat over the side. That side of the ship was low as she leaned to the gale; that might have seemed to simplify things to the ignorant wastrels trying to lower the boat. But one glimpse at the rushing foam alongside ought to have given even idiots pause. Then Ben appeared, flicking red drops broadcast as he blew his nose with a grampus snort.

"You're a good one to start on!" he snuffled, and reached for Kopp. "You kicked me in the stummick once. You're one man I can lick anyway."

Kopp fought, snarling in fear of that battered grin. Ben made no bluff at sporty fighting here. Kopp had kicked him in the stomach. He kicked Kopp in the stomach. And Kopp doubled up with a grunt. Then the ship lurched; it was the time she was almost allowed to come upright by the careless helmsman. Some wide-awake member of Yerner's gang saw the lone chance, and yelled. The boat slipped down past the rail, and Yerner leaped into it. The rest followed, letting go the tackle falls as Kopp and Stoll, still dazed, rolled over the bulwarks among them.

The ship had picked up her headway again. Kopp fell across the boat's gunwale, tilting her. The forward tackle unrove faster than the after one, and the bow dipped. The boat filled, Kopp fell into the sea, and then the after fall was slashed through, letting the waterlogged boat swirl fast astern with her yelping, frightened occupants. It happened swiftly. Somebody had cut that fall from on deck. Ben saw old Jed Roach putting away his sheath knife.

"You drowned 'em, Jed!" he said, all his anger gone in the disaster.

"I give 'em all the chance they'll have," returned Jed, soberly. "If somebuddy hadn't cut thet fall, they'd ha' got towed under."

"Might as well have," muttered Ben, peering into the gray mist astern. "Secure the boat gear that's left, anyway."

Dick ached with tension at the wheel. He barely heard what was reported about the boat. He had not turned his head as the yelping gang sped astern into the chill unknown. He was watching the last growling breakers, and they were almost weathered. Ben said something to him, but he never heard it. He gritted out some orders about the carpenter going below to help the steward prepare the captain for burial, then gave all his attention to his steering again. And the ship won past, fathom by fathom; hurled to leeward when a heavier sea struck her, eating her brave way up to windward at the touch of the helm as she recovered.

Then, after one breath stopping moment of doubt, came Dick's yell:

"She's made it! Check in the yards a trifle, lads! She's clear!"

CHAPTER XXXII

"RANZO IS A SAILOR!"

"Now Ranzo is a sailor,
Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!
He's skipper of that whaler,
Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!"

Dick sang that verse without thinking. It was the natural ebullition of confident youth. He had given up the helm to a seaman and paced the deck rapidly. His haste might have been due to nervousness, or excitement, or sheer need of warmth—for the wind was bitter. Actually it was nothing but his old-time cockiness mellowed by hard experience into pride of achievement. He was scarcely thinking of the ship then; though he keenly kept track of the vanishing shore line and the course the ship made. That alone proved his right to the position he had taken. Ship sense was instinctive in him. He had only heard of the Strait of Le Maire, between Staten Island and Tierra del Fuego; but he was steering the ship towards the narrow strait, eighty miles or so ahead, with as little uncertainty as if he already saw the passage.

What he was thinking about had little to do with the ship, though she was somewhere in the train of thought. He grinned as he sang, and he sang loudly. His father used to sing that old chantey to him. At first the old man would sing it to amuse the boy. Later, and to the end, Peter Edwards sang it to show his contempt for the first Edwards to turn up his nose at clean salt water and good healthy sperm blubber. Old Peter had said, to clinch his bitter argument, that any of those old whalemen would make fertilizer out of the lot of youthful rebels Dick ran with. Ben Barrett was about the toughest whaleman out of that port, and Ben . . . Dick stopped singing to laugh. He had certainly given poor old Ben a hot handful at last. He would make it up to Ben. He owed much to Ben. That was a creditable thought for a lad like Dick Edwards. It showed that his mind was holding a true course after all. But it did not dim his triumph one scintilla.

"Hoorah for Reuben Ranzo,
Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!
Three cheers for Reuben Ranzo,
Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!"

June came out and joined him. She was wrapped up in a big coat, wore the steward's fur cap, and the smallest pair of rubber boots from the slop chest. Dick greeted her with a grin, which froze at her look.

"Dick! Have you forgotten Captain Turk is dead?" she reproved him. She had been crying. Dick had been so full of his triumph that he really had forgotten for the moment the reason for it. And he was man enough to feel shamed before this almost fragile girl who had spent herself so prodigally in tending the dead skipper.

"Gee, I'm sorry. I forgot," he muttered, and took off his cap, for they were bringing Turk's body up for burial. That long white canvas package, sewn and roped and ballasted with an iron sheerpole, looked shivery in the gray light. Snow settled on it as it lay beside the gangway. Dick remembered the burial of June's uncle. He looked anxiously at her, feeling that she ought to go below. But her eyes were dry now. She was going to say farewell to her friend. When that mortal bundle slipped into the chill sea, she was very much alone in the world. So far as she knew, her future went with the bundle.

"You read the service, Ben," Dick suggested, when the grating was ready.

"Hell, I ain't fit to send nobody to heaven!" growled Ben. "Launch him yourself, Dick. You're skipper."

Dick was embarrassed. It was a strange feeling, but he felt inadequate in sight of that dry eyed girl so bravely waiting. But he was taking the responsibility of the ship; he must take it all or none. He sent the steward for the prayer book. And when he stood beside the grating he tried honestly to read the service for burial at sea. He could not. He blushed, coughed, and failed. He caught the eye of Ben Barrett fixed upon him in encouragement. June was nervously waiting.

"I can't say a word!" he snapped. "How do I rate to say prayers for a man? Here, Chips, open the sewing a couple of inches!"

The canvas was opened, the prayer book slipped inside, and stitched up again. Dick gave the signal silently, and the body slid down into the sea without a splash.

CHAPTER XXXIII

HOMEWARD BOUND

THERE were warm tropic days and star dusted nights after the cruel test of Cape Horn. Days when golden weed strewed the sea, when fat sperm whales fluked and spouted about the ship in perfect security. They seemed to know how to read the signs; knew that royals set aboard a rusty, sea bleached whaler meant a bung-full ship homeward bound.

There were windless watches when old men grumbled darkly of luck, of endless passages, of ships that had reached as far as the Line in the Atlantic and floated there unmoving until their crews fell apart and only skeletons rattled about the bone dry decks. There were brave, blustery days when old men and young bragged like heroic liars of passages so swift that skippers had no time to keep the log written up; which was the only reason for those passages being undiscoverable in the records.

Musty old shore clothes had to come out for airing and mending. June sewed on a hundred buttons for men who believed in the adequacy of bits of rope yarn as fasteners. The cabins had to be turned out and painted. With so rich a cargo, and in his new pride, Dick believed his ship ought to return home like a regular ship as far as paint and tar could make her. He told Ben.

"It ain't goin' to make shares any bigger," grumbled Ben. "Sometimes owners don't feel so kind to a feller for wastin' paint on a homeward bounder. But you know best. Your father——"

"I know!" Dick broke in with a grin. "Dad always brags about smart ships and smart mates. Go ahead and we'll show him, Ben!"

Dick had taken pains with Ben ever since that convincing fight. As soon as he saw that the mate really wanted to work with him, and was not biding his time to wreck him, he reciprocated in a way that surprised Ben. The entire business of the mate's antagonism was a mystery; the sudden change was a deeper one. But the change was as sincere as it was apparent, and it set Dick to thinking. If Ben Barrett had been less of a whaleman, and more of a self-seeker, he would have picked up enough navigation to get himself a command. At least enough so that when Turk died he would have been in undisputed command of the *Cuttyhunk* for the rest of the voyage. But Ben was afraid of figures that had decimals to them. He was scared of the mere word "logarithm." He could work a traverse by the book; once he had made a stab at getting a meridian altitude for latitude. But he went no further at the time, and once he had forgotten the rule he let it go. If he had been left to himself when the skipper passed along, Ben Barrett would have found an anchorage in the nearest port of the visible land, or at most tried for Port Stanley in the Falklands.

But under Dick's tuition Ben was seeing the light. As Dick laid them out, logarithms and decimals had no terrors. Spherical trigonometry, as simplified by tables and explained by Dick, was amusement to a man who could cut out a topsail.

"You practice this voyage, Ben, and you'll have command the next," Dick vowed.

Ben growled doubtfully; but he plodded on. He took sights, worked them out, and compared them with Dick's results on the day when the coast might be expected to break the horizon ahead.

"Your position agrees with mine within a mile and a half," Dick told him. "And you're as likely to be right as I am, Ben. The chronometer's likely to be a bit out by now, and there was a haze low down at morning sight. You'd better sit for your certificate soon's we got in, old-timer."

Ben still growled, but he felt all perked up just the same. Something might come out of this mad voyage, after all. Mad voyage it had been, what with the barren months at setting out, the crazy tale of treasure that had turned the ship into a bedlam, the rich haul of whales due only to a devastating convulsion of nature, and the death of Turk on the eve of a successful homecoming. Yes, and maddest of all, his own resignation to the usurpation of command by young Dick Edwards—a first voyage greenhorn! But Ben always grinned at that memory. He knew his reasons. He knew what he was about, did Ben Barrett.

Then the land lay ahead at last. In a smoky summer twilight it was raised, and the ship changed course to run along the coast to her harbor.

"We'll be up there by morning, Ben. Do you want to get the anchors over now?" Dick remarked.

Ben did. So did the men. For once in a long time even the small lay men were sure of taking up a bit of money. In the *Cuttyhunk* were plenty of old men who remembered many a voyage after sperm when they came home from a three year voyage and not one iron dollar to take. Some of them could tell of voyages when they had to cut wood all winter for the owner to pay for money and clothes and tobacco advanced to them. Here was nothing like that. Get the anchors over? Sure, and never mind a bit of night work.

IN THE morning, the old familiar Point lay stretched out ahead. Jed Roach pointed it out with a grin and a wink at Ben. Dick grinned, too. He knew what they were thinking about. But just at the moment he was watching a dark blue line of cloud that overlay an otherwise faultless dawn. It looked like one of those sharp summer squalls.

"What d'you think about it?" Dick asked Jed and Ben rather anxiously. He was on his toes now. Sailing the ship up from Old Stiff had seemed easy; now he was in sight of home, and the thought of all that meant struck him, he was almost nervous. June had been beside him for ten minutes, eager to be shown this new land that was to be home to her, too; and he had not noticed her.

"Wind, likely," said Jed, shortly. Jed was jealous for fear the lad weaken now. Let him sail his own traverse.

"It's wind, and plenty of it," growled Ben. "Maybe you kin git to anchor before it busts."

"All right," said Dick quickly, "let's sock it to her!"

They sailed her. They made that old blubber hunter hum. She foamed through the seas under powerful gusts of rising wind until the men on the lightship rubbed their eyes and reckoned old Turk had gone crazy at last. Maybe hadn't struck one whale.

But nobody was crazy. Dick sailed the ship almost to the outer anchorage before the storm really broke; and he drove her the rest of the way on bravado. There they anchored her, for no man could have taken her up the harbor, and if there were no better tugboats now than when last she sailed home, nobody would come out for her until the storm passed.

"She ain't holding," Ben reported half an hour after the anchor went down.

"Give her the other one, and slack out until you have thirty-five fathom on one and fifty on the other," said Dick.

In another half hour the ship was tugging hard at both anchors at the end of both cables. But nobody minded much. There was home, and it was only a summer storm. It would soon pass, then out would puff the tug, and home at last.

"She's dragging!" Dick said. He had watched a shore bearing. The leeward quarter was a bad nest of rocky shoals. If she dragged much nearer to that she was likely to put her cargo ashore on the beach and herself on the bottom.

"She's got all both cables," said Ben. "It's blowin' harder, ain't it, Jed?"

"Thar's more comin' too," grunted Jed. This was where a man must show the stuff that was in him. There were people over on the shore, watching the ship every minute.

"Take Chips and stand by to slip both cables, Ben," Dick decided at last. "Jed, take Hogg with you. Pick the best of the men. We'll give her the three lower topsails and reefed spanker and inner jib; then slip reef and set the foresail, and drive her to sea again until it moderates. Better reef the foresail first. Sing out when you're all ready."

They worked her out. Both anchors were let lie on the bottom of the sea, and folks ashore, who had watched the dragging ship, breathed easier to see her weather the shoals and square away down the leeward coast.

She ran out of sight. By evening she was working back again, with a fresh mild breeze, and a sparkling sea. Outside the harbor a new tugboat steamed alongside from seaward.

"Take you up for two hundred, Cap!"

"Don't need a tow," Dick returned.

The tug went ahead, then circled and ranged alongside again.

"Take you for a hundred, cap. Likely to blow again."

"I'll get in before that," said Dick.

The new tugmaster saw the youth of the whaler's skipper and was bent on making a dollar or two. His tug had to run in for coal anyhow. But why not make this youngster pay?

"Give us your line, Cap. Take you up for fifty dollars."

"Put us alongside the dock for thirty, and use your own line," Dick countered.

Jed and Ben Barrett grumbled. This was needless extravagance. The gesture of a youngster who wanted to make his home entry in style behind a fine new tug. A launch could take their lines to the wharf. Dick grinned at their mutterings.

"You're a smart one, you are!" roared the tugboatman. "S'pose I'll have to be charitable. Stand by to take my line, then."

"Go on, Ben," said Dick, and continued pacing the deck with fine nonchalance. As soon as the tug began to tow, he called the mate aft.

"Now get sail off her, and give her a proper harbor stow. Let's show 'em something!"

Serenely they swam up the harbor. When abreast of the old wharf from which she had sailed, he could see almost everybody in the little town watching the ship, appraising her cargo by her waterline. And Dick suddenly remembered a duty he had overlooked. Sight of Mrs. Turk there on the end of the wharf gave him a sharp jolt.

"Jed," he said, soberly, all pride for the moment gone from him, "haul the flag to halfmast. I've been so stuck up I forgot."

When the ship's lines were ashore, and the tugboatman had taken his thirty dollars with a sly comment on the young skipper's hard bargaining powers, Dick answered shortly. The man sheered off, muttering something about young buckos who put on dog when they got command. The man's eyes roved all over the old ship; and in a minute he yelled:

"Hey, Cap, where's your anchors?"

"Lost 'em!" Dick yelled back, and managed a grin again.

What the tugmaster said to that brought all hands on ship and shore running to hear gems of language hitherto unguessed. He had been wangled into docking that ancient ship, loaded with rich cargo, for thirty dollars, when if he had known she had no anchors and must have a tug anyhow he could have held her owners up for a fat slice of her value.

"If there was any doubt about you bein' an Edwards, that's settled it!" announced Ben Barrett, regarding Dick with a new and sincere admiration.

"Hurry the gangway, Ben," Dick told him. "Help Missis Turk aboard gently."

Behind Mrs. Turk stalked old Peter Edwards, his eyes roving all over the ship to discover for whom that flag flew at half-mast. His deep lined face brightened at sight of Dick; then he helped Turk's widow aboard with rough sympathy.

CHAPTER XXXIV

IN CONCLUSION

SPERM oil was at top price. The *Cuttykunk* paid the biggest lays in the history of the port, and young Dick Edwards had outsmarted the new tugboat skipper who had made few friends.

Old Peter Edwards took care of his old friend's widow, and June was already helping to ease the bereavement. The wife of a whaleman had need of courage. Mrs. Turk was no exception. She met life with a quiet smile, and found a great deal of comfort in the sunny girl whose own homeless state made her akin to her.

Ben Barrett went away to Boston to sit for his master's license, and Jed Roach surprised himself and everybody else by going with him to try for a second mate's ticket. Peter Edwards was bragging all around the little port about his boy, shanghaied off to sea on his first voyage and coming home skipper of a bung-full spouter.

"Didn't I always say the boy was a proper Edwards?" he bragged over and over again.

But Ben had gone away too soon to satisfy Peter. There was a juicy yarn to spin about that voyage when he came back. Dick had surprisingly little to say about it. He grinned mostly when his father tried to pump him.

"But you're goin' whalin' again, ain't you, Dick?" the old gentleman asked anxiously. "You done right smart your first trip."

"I'm not sure," replied Dick, with a mischievous grin. "I had thought of buying Sims Revel's store and getting married."

"Well, if you ain't the beat of anything I ever knowed!" old Peter exploded. "When I wanted you to go to work in the store, you——"

"You wanted me to swing a broom," grinned Dick. "Wait till Barrett comes back. Perhaps I'll go up for a license myself. But what's all the bunk I hear about that shanghai job Ben put up on me? What do you know about it?"

"Me?" Peter Edwards could look cherubic on occasion.

"Oh well, never mind. I'll ask Ben. I'm going to see June now."

"I'll go with you," announced Peter. "I have to see Martha about some business."

"Martha?" queried Dick.

"Missus Turk!" snapped Peter. "Have to make some arrangement about the gal. Can't expect the widder to take her in jest for sentiment, can I?"

"I didn't know you were expected to bother about it at all."

"Oh, shet up!" said Peter.

WHEN Ben and Jed returned, there was a cosy gathering in the old whaler's cuddy. The last cedar logs from the treasure island blazed in the fireplace; there was a rich aroma of old Jamaica; the age blackened beams were hazy with cigar smoke.

"I didn't git my license," growled Ben Barrett. "Them young steamboat navigators scared me out of it." He looked fairly happy about it.

"I got my second mate's license," said Jed. "I guess they was sorry fer me. Never would have got it if 'twasn't fer young Dick, though."

"Seems as if you'd have to go up and try, Dick," remarked Peter. "Got to have a skipper for the old hooker, haven't we?"

"I'm not sure I want to go whaling again," said Dick. The cuddy was warm and redolent of cigars and cedar logs and rum. In the swirling smoke it was easy for youth to see pictures. Dick went on speaking in a detached sort of voice, and somehow it lulled the older men into lazy acquiescence with his views while he was talking.

"Whaling's dying out," Dick went on. "It's a mighty fine school for a wild youngster, but no sort of business for a young man to enter upon. It's an old time business; let the old-timers see it out."

"I don't want to sail 'long o' no new skipper," grumbled Jed.

"Me neither," growled Ben. "I'd ruther go fust mate wi' you, young Dick, than master wi' a new fust mate."

Dick laughed. He got up and stretched.

It was old company for young blood, and he was taking no rum.

"I've got a date," he told them. "Don't worry about your old blubber hunter. She shan't lack a skipper. Shall I give June your love, Ben? How about you, Jed? I won't take yours, dad. You're too darned fond of hugging her now."

Dick left a silence behind him. It lasted for many minutes. Then out of the corners, like dream voices from a mist of memories, came short, broken scraps of talk, all mellow and fragrant with Manila and Jamaica.

"Dick's stuck on thet gal . . . ."

"Wants to buy Revel's store and fix it up modern, and marry her . . . ."

"She ain't but a kid herself . . . ."

"She's as old as my missus was, Jed. But she ain't had no home training."

"He better make another full v'yage, wi' me fust mate 'long 'o him, and Jed secont."

"Thet's what I been tryin' to tell him. Thet gal needs a year o' home life 'fore she's ready to be a wife. I figger Martha kin give it to her. She's in love wi' the little gal. Who ain't? And then when Dick comes home he'll be older and she'll be old enough, and mebbe Martha and me might——"

"What? You old quahaug!" grunted Ben, leaning forward.

"If you ain't—" gasped Jed.

"Oh, shet up!" growled Peter Edwards, hauling sharp on a wind, having been surprised into words he had no intention of uttering for a long time yet.

There was another near silence out of which came rumblings. When the rumblings died, old Peter's voice spoke again:

"What about young Yerner? Ben never told——"

"Turk sent for him to tell him to be a good lad and he'd cry quits—" Ben began, and Jed carried on:

"An' the dumblasted rascal had to go an' git gay wi' June. 'Dick turned to an' hammered seven hells out o' his mug an' hove him out on deck——"

"So when Turk sent for him ag'in, the whelp was scared to go!" finished Ben.

"I reckon they got to shore," Jed mused. "Thet kind would. If you're born to be hung, you kin never drownd."

Another silence. The smoke and spirits reek thicker. Voices lazier and drowsier.

"How about thet reward you got comin', Ben?" Peter murmured. "Seems as if the boy was too much for you, don't it? Or do you figure you deserve your pay?"

"I ain't sure, Peter," said Ben gloomily.

"How about it, Jed?"

"Mebbe he don't desarve it, but he sure 'arned it!" chuckled Jed.

"Mebbe you're right, Jed. Mebbe you're right," sighed Peter. "I don't see how you missed your master's license, though. 'Twould ha' bin fitter for a master to own shares in his ship than a fust mate."

Ben chuckled. He reached out that long, broken fisted right arm that had played so strong a part in making a shipmaster out of a wild lad, and took a fresh cheroot. He lighted it, and sank back in his chair still chuckling.

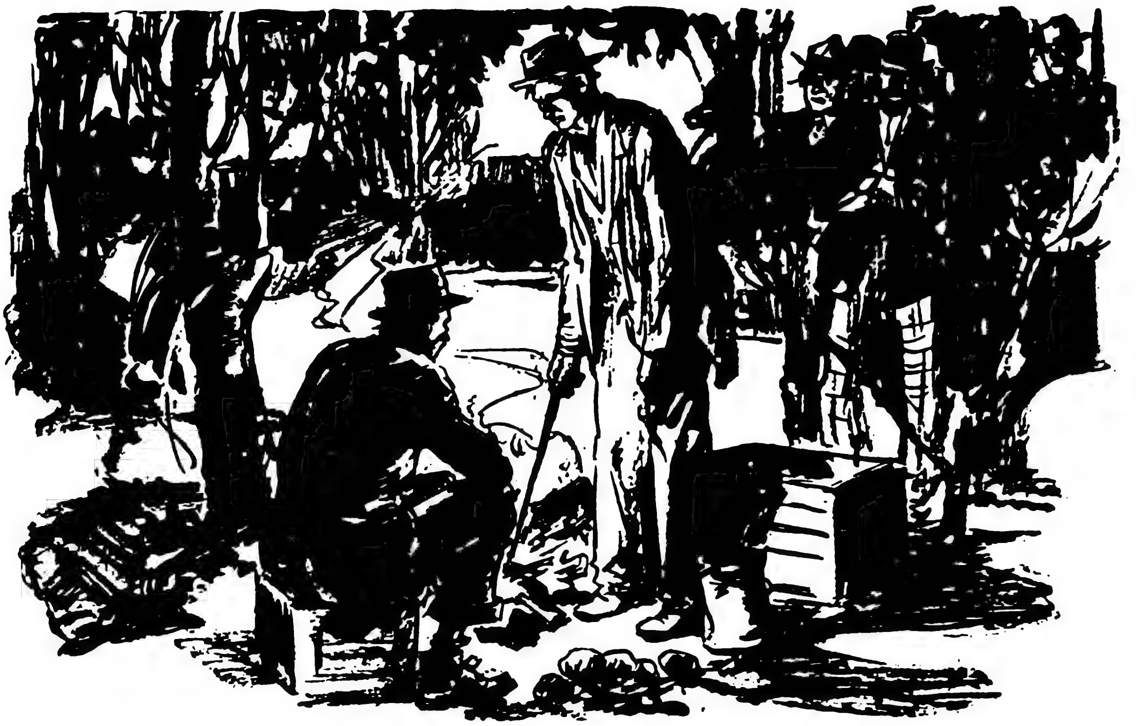
And just at the moment when Dick Edwards and June came out of a hug and into an agreement that he had better take the ship out for one complete voyage, and leave her in Martha's capable hands for a year's course in friendly domestic economy before turning Revel's grimy old store into a modern outfitting establishment, and making June a bride, Ben Barrett murmured through the blue and blessed haze at his somnolent and blissful old cronies:

"I hope as young Dick 'grees to take your ship out ag'in, Peter. But if he don't, I reckon mebbe I told you a lie about thet license o' mine. I jest wanted to surprise him arter we got to sea, thet's all. You don't 'magine a feller as young Dick teached would fail, do you?"

"Seein' as you teached *him,*" came just before a snore from Jed Roach's corner.

"Ben allus had a tall opinion of hisself," breathed Peter Edwards.

THE END



The JUNGLE CAT

A Whimsical Tale of the Brotherhood of the Open Road

By RUBY ERWIN LIVINGSTON

IN THE shelter of a little ravine flanked by a dense haw thicket, sat five hoboes waiting. They waited patiently, even eagerly, for a lard bucket of mulligan was beginning to simmer on a huge bed of glowing coal, obtained from the near-by coal chute.

Two men dozed; two read newspapers, commenting on them to the fifth, Missouri Pete, who tended stew with a peeled maple branch. The reading stopped abruptly as keen ears detected footsteps approaching from the bank to their left.

"Some guy's nose has scented our stew! Hand him a match, Pete. I worked six blocks to git the onions and potatoes fer that pot," growled Cyclone, who once hailed from Kansas.

A pleasant voice interrupted:

"What's chances to warm at yer fire, pardner? I see yer smoke just as I was goin' to make camp myself, over here."

The speaker scrambled stiffly down the five-foot bank carrying a small avalanche of gravel with him. He dusted his rusty overcoat with a drawn, crippled hand and limped toward them, smiling.

The five appraised the newcomer and at once accepted him; he would receive no match with its silent significance to light out. Obviously, he was a jungle cat, but he "belonged" to tramp aristocracy. His ruddy countenance was fresh and clear, although he could have utilized a barber's service. Above his twinkling Irish blue eyes there rose a mop of auburn hair, topped by a huge cap set at a jaunty angle. He might even pass for an old sailor, from the cut of his coat and his rolling gait.

"I reckon there's no use workin' yer back for wood and coal just now," decided Missouri Pete. "But I'll say yer smeller's good. Then onions is just beginnin' to boil, but there'll be plenty, I'm thinkin'."

"I'll make my own bed, and dare any man to put up a better windbreak," said the stranger. "I'm Tennessee Red and I've got the makin's of a couple of good meals in my pockets, share and share alike."

From a huge rip in the overcoat lining he disgorged half a dozen raw sweet potatoes, two onions and several turnips. From another coat, a bag of stale bread, and from a third a roll of cooked roast. Tough, undoubtedly, yet yielding juice if boiled long enough.

"I'll tell the woild youse knows how to forage. You didn't break a lock or pay real money for them?" Pete wanted to know, frank admiration in his eyes.

"I did not. I use my eyes when I'm travelin' and advise others to do the same. When I pass a farm, I look for a potato patch or mounds where they've been hilled for the winter. It's not hard to dig out a few with a sharp stick, when the folks are away from home.

"This time, though, I had bad luck; for they didn't take the dog. However, I saw him first, and with a good start I made it to the fence. But he took a good piece out of the first two pairs of pants I got on. I'll have to do some mendin'."

"Got any needles or thread?" asked a listener.

"Yeh, but I'm no pogie stiff. Had a little money up to a month ago, but got sick and it went for medicine. My luck exactly—that's why I quit reg'lar jobs. I've seen better days, if I am only a jungle cat. You're a transcontinental, ain't you?" the newcomer asked, turning to Pete.

"Yeh, and I'm headin' now down through to San 'Tone, up to Los Angeles and 'Frisco, back next summer to Kansas and on to Maine. Texas Kid, here, is with me," Pete said, nodding toward that worthy.

"I don't cover so much territory; like it better slow. And the little towns are so friendly. I spend most of my winters in Arkansas and northern Luzziana; there's no beatin' the hills fer shelter. Sometimes I stay one place fer ten days. Ah, here comes the Sunshine Special makin' fifty mile an hour. There's a train for you!"

The roar drowned further talk and the sextette idly scanned the train barely half a block away and watched the Pullmans slowing down for the distant station. Lights were twinkling in its windows and already diners could be seen at tables in the rear car.

Tennessee Red still gazed wistfully and observed:

"I had a aunt on my mother's side who took a long trip once and et in the diner. She used to tell us all about it, and I think it set me to wanderin'. Always wondered how it'd feel to put yer feet under a fine table and eat while you watched the scenery go by. Sometimes I dream about it yet—" He broke off to laugh. "Though I know I'll never see the day."

He started placing potatoes to roast.

Pete stirred the stew reflectively:

"I dunno. Better keep yer table manners . . . Have thick soup or consomme, mister? An' the potatoes *au gratin* are fine with the tenderloin steaks an' mushrooms, sir." And Pete bowed, waiter fashion, and cupped his hand.

"Aw go to the devil," commanded Red. "What I wanta know is—anybody got any Java?"

"Well, Aleck's got nearly enough for a cup around, but we was savin' that for breakfast—economical, we is," remarked Texas Kid.

"But I carry my own can; also my percolator," said Red, displaying a coffee stained bit of cloth and a small package of coffee. "Let it go. I've got enough for three cups to put in for breakfast. But I do insist on it bein' boiled in this cloth exactly four minutes."

Pete laughed:

"Make it yerself then, and time it by yer own Gruen. Since yer helpin' furnish, we'll humor you. Our breakfast hour is eight, prompt."

"Then I'll be gittin' a few branches for my windbreak. And you can call me if that stew's extra fast, cookin'," said Red and made for the thicket.

"You're a pretty good old daddy. Guess I'll help you," offered Texas Kid. "It looks like we'll have a chilly night."

"Aye, and a hard winter—bark's thick on the trees. Wish I could make it down to Florida, but it's too far. They say there's real jungles there; moss that hangs from trees that makes a bed fit for a king."

"Yes, but we ain't no kings," reminded the Kid, whose bones were young and who liked desert sand. "And they do tell there's heaps of reptiles there."

"Bad as southern Luzziana I reckon," agreed Red. "So I'll keep out of both places. Here's some good leafy oak branches. Save time and work. I've got a monstrous appetite."

A wave of pity swept the Kid. He knew the gnawing hunger of the road, the constant craving never satisfied.

"Say, daddy, build your bed against mine, and it won't take long to fix it. You can pad it with grass. I spotted a new can over here, just about right fer mulligan."

"Then I reckon we've got about enough brush," panted the old man gratefully, rubbing his stiff back with his good hand. The Kid swooped down, gathered the entire load and made off with it, calling to Red to bring the can.

IT WAS dark before the lean-to was finished and Missouri Pete called them to the meal. Light trash, thrown on the fire, made a cheerful glow, and the group drew close and held out cans and divided the bread and potatoes. Somebody had salt—a whole nickel's worth.

The squad grew quiet except for supping, smacking of lips and occasional grunts of satisfaction. Darkness closed in upon them. Two or three stars glowed in the blackness above, and a wheezing freight train, stopping for coal, threw a cloud of steam and sparks across their narrow vista and was gone.

The meal finished, scraps were hoarded and pipes lighted. Story-telling began. Red contributed, but shook his head when asked about his youth and said his folks would be ashamed of him. He had run away after his mother died, not claiming his share of the property. Did pretty well till crippled.

Asked if he never cared to visit big cities, Red replied:

"Oh, sometimes. Then I go and give 'em the once-over for a day. But they're noisy and the cops are hard on a guy. Gimme a place like this and I'll stay several days. Then I'll be movin' on ag'in."

Suddenly the peace of the scene was disturbed by a hoarse whisper from down the gully, and a dark form, writhing along like a snake, made its way toward the group. Again came the sibilant whisper:

"Say, can't you guys do a good toin and gimme a bite to eat? I'm down on me luck and dassen't make the house. Give us a bite?"

"Stay where you are. We don't take no broncos," commanded the voice of Pete.

"Aw have a heart! Im starvin' and the bulls is after me. Bring me some bread, can't youse?"

"Hell! Reckon I'll have to to be rid of yer."

Pete poured a bit of water into the stew and poured a thin canful. He got out three biscuits and took the food to the waiting one, saying in a low tone:

"Put that down in a hurry and take the bread with yer. We aint hankerin' fer the lock-up. Hunt yer own kind."

"Ye're damn right I will and stay wid 'em, next time!" The stranger rolled to a sitting posture and Pete caught the gleam of the butt of an automatic in a breast pocket and the bloody streak of a scalp wound on the bare head. He made no comment.

"Throw away yer can and ye're excused," he commanded, slowly strolling toward the fire, as the outcast crawled away. "The guy's prob'ly bumped somebody off in a holdup and had to beat it," he informed the group about the fire. "But we can't take him."

The stories were resumed. Then after a while, Pete said:

"I'm turnin' in now. And no man ever wears the shoes he swipes off me, I warn you."

"Time for my beauty nap, too," said Red, "and I've enjoyed meetin' you gents. I'll make coffee in the mornin and the man that's got a dirty can gets no Java."

He lay down, removed a stick from beneath his ribs, adjusted his overcoat blanket and was soon snoring. The wind rustled the leaves of his shelter and a few snowflakes swirled, but none of it reached him. The other four men had barely closed their eyes to sleep before a couple of sharp, staccato barks sounded from two pistols a short distance away. Texas Kid stirred and put out a hand toward Cyclone:

"Keep yer hands off me, you fool! I heard it," whispered the latter. "Better git to snorin' before a cop comes prowlin' to arrest us. Less we know about this the better."

"I ain't seen nothin' nor heard nothin'," declared the Kid.

There was the distant sound of running

feet, a few muffled shouts and once more all was silent.

A TWINGE of pain roused Red ahead of the others next morning and he squinted to see if the sun was up. It was, and he judged the time to be near eight o'clock. Quietly, he rose and raked the embers aside and added fuel to the fire.

"Thought sure 'twas cloudy from the way I ache,'" he murmured, regarding the sky. "I'd better head south. I don't like the smell of the wind from the northeast."

He took a bucket and went down to the stream and filled the vessel. Then he washed his face, drying it carefully on a red bandanna. Hastily combing his red locks he returned to the blazing fire and made the coffee. Loath to part with his own last bit, he would not hold out on the gang.

"Hey youse!" he called. "Outa there, you lazy bums, or yer toast'll be scorched. Kettle's boilin'."

Growls and snorts answered this until Pete opened his eyes, then rapped the soles of feet near him with his stick. Muttered curses responded, but the sluggards scattered for hasty toilettes.

Red called for cans to be brought and if the four minutes boiling was not accurate, there was no complaint. Missouri Pete asked how the coffee was made. Red explained, adding:

"I think the difference in the coffee's worth washing the cloth every day."

"I'll say it is," agreed 'Frisco. "I'm gonna git me a cloth. How'd you sleep, Red?"

"Fair, till my leg got to hurtin' . . . There—I knew it. The sun's goin' in. Gonna have rain in twenty-four hours."

"Let us do the rustlin' and you tend fire," advised Texas Kid. "You've still got grub."

"That coffee'll be good boiled over, and that roast we got ought to be put on right now," agreed Red. "Sorry I fooled so long and let winter catch me. It'll be hard on my rheumatism, but I mustn't envy the rich," he concluded.

"Damn little they care about you!" exclaimed Aleck. "Why you don't even speak their language."

"Mooch a quarter now and then off some guy and sleep in a flop, Red," suggested Pete.

"Lord save us! The last time I tried it, years ago, I had to git outa that bouncey, soft thing they call a bed and down on the floor before I could sleep. No wonder them house folks die young. How old d'you think I am?"

The gang allowed for fresh air and agreed on sixty-two.

Red chuckled, squared his shoulders, and then told them:

"I'm seventy-two and I'll see ninety if I keep out of the rain. I'll be leavin' about one, today. Sun dogs a-comin'."

"No hurry, pard," said Pete. "Still, we'd better forage wide, for fear he's right, boys. Scatter now and ask fer bread and coffee, too. I'll get coal," he added as they began to move.

Toward noon it grew colder, and Red had the stew ready a bit early. They came in promptly and were just sitting down to eat when Cyclone hurried along the gully. He bore news.

"Y'know that bronco we had? He got his, down in the switch yard, tryin' to board a frieght. Cops was watchin' trains and spotted him. Told him to halt and he never stopped till the bullets dropped him——"

"We heard the shots, me and Cyclone," put in Texas Kid.

"Shut yer trap, will yer? He'd killed an officer in Oklahoma while he was robbin' a car; made it this far dodgin' around. Thing is—cops are roundin' vags right an' left. I been hid half the morning. Mighty little grub I got. We've got to dodge or be canned."

"Better bank yer fire and hurry with the grub, then scatter," advised Red, and all fell to, hurriedly. Red said he'd get to a place to wash and mend. Something told them he did not want a companion. Such as it was, he preferred playing a lone hand. Down the road he limped till he reached a certain creek and turned off to the right.

TWENTY-FOUR hours later found Red slipping from a box car at a siding four miles out of Little Rock. Rain had drenched his washing and prevented his foraging for food. He was hungry, his leg ached cruelly, and he grumbled at the clinkers in the roadbed. Pausing to rub his cramped knee, he spied a hickory staff just outside the track.

Stepping out to get it, he was surprised to sink in soft mud.

"Must've had a gully washer here this mornin'," he remarked, looking up at the drenched bluff, with its boulder perched beside a scrub oak on the very edge. His eyes grew wide in astonishment. "Gosh a'mighty, I'm seeing things. It's—it's—movin'. . . ."

There was a sliding, rasping sound as apparently the whole hillside coasted down and over the track. Red took a backward leap, tripped and fell as a rock bounded out and struck him on the temple. Followed dead silence for a full minute and then Red's eyes fluttered open with an expression of surprise. He stared at the sky above him and slowly recalled what had happened.

He strove to rise, but found his body more than half covered by the sticky mud. Trying to move his legs, he found them pinioned and numb. Freeing his arm, he began to rake the pile from his legs. Painfully, he began to move; no bones broken. With difficulty he crawled aside from the débris and sat up. Red felt something brush his chin, and, pulling, drew out a withered plume of goldenrod lodged in his coat by its clump of roots. He threw back his head and laughed:

"Blame if I wasn't planted and had flowers on me breast and didn't know it!" Then, more serious, he admitted aloud, "Like to've smashed me sure. That big rock 'ud smash a dozen men. Lodged right against the rail, too."

He rose and circled halfway around the heap, and then thought of the train. Well, it was not his business to keep the track clear. He was hungry. Dimly he recalled Aleck's voice, "Damn little they care about you." But he had fed for twenty years on human kindness—he was a parasite! Somewhere deep within Red's heart a divine spark smoldered and leaped to burning flame. He must go back and signal—*now!* The Sunshine Special, pride of the entire system, must be about due. He glanced at the sun, shining dimly, and began to run along the way he had come. Like lightning, he pictured the passengers hurrying south from the cold, or to sick relatives. Back in the diner, folks who had never known what it was to have their bellies writhe and gnaw with hunger were eating nice hot food. . . .

A distant blast of a whistle startled him and he ran faster. What if the engineer was not looking, or the fireman shoveling coal? Stay in the middle of the track! Wave at 'em, up and down, up and down. They'd understand. His mind worked mechanically, untrained in emergency. His breath was getting short. With a roar, the train rounded a bend and sped like a tornado toward him, a mile a minute. Red waved frantically, but they did not see his crippled hand.

Quick, the bandanna! God, where was the engineer? Fumbling in a pocket, Red shuddered at the giant mogul bearing down nearer.

Terror smote him as he stopped; he had seen men cut to bits. He must risk it.

"Just a bum . . . God help—a bum!" he gasped.

Thirty yards away! Now a head popped out the cab window as the red bandanna fluttered.

Toot! Toot! Too-oot!

The frantic shriek of the whistle fairly split his ears, but he leaped clear in one supreme effort and went hurtling down the embankment to lay panting in the mud below.

There followed a horrible grinding of brakes, skidding of wheels and application of compressed air as the Sunshine came to a stop some train lengths ahead. The muddy figure scrambled to its feet and struck a trot as the engineer jumped to the ground and ran to meet him.

"For God's sake, what's happened! Trying to commit suicide?" gasped the pale engineer, shaking Red's arm.

"No, but I thought you'd never understand. Around the curve—a landslide—big rock woulda ditched you sure! I—I just had to stop you," he apologized humbly.

The engineer let go weakly and wobbled on his feet:

"Thank God, my passengers are safe! Here old man, I've got a fiver in my pocket I want you to have." He fumbled in vain, grimy fingers finding only a dollar bill and some small change. "Guess I'm mistaken, will you take this?" he blurted, dumping it into the tramp's muddy hand.

A strange exaltation filled the heart of Tennessee Red and he smiled benignly, man to man:

"Now don't you mind about that, I

didn't do it for pay. A dollar's plenty and you keep the change. I'm just a bum, glad to do you folks a good turn, and if you'd 'a' got me, I figured 'twouldn't be nobody's loss."

The engineer blinked. The conductor blew his nose violently and said:

"You're all white and here's five dollars I want to give you. God only knows how many would have died here if you hadn't taken that chance. Stay with the train, will you?" And he went running back to telegraph from the nearest booth.

"Who took a chance . . . Died where?"

"Did he keep us from being ditched?"

A dozen voices were asking questions as passengers came running from the coaches.

"I—I didn't know how else to do," ventured Red uncertainly.

"It was the thing to do, and a flagman couldn't have done better . . . Landslide ahead," informed the fireman, adding, "I want to chip in a mite, too."

"Damned if that isn't the only decent thing. Where's a hat?" demanded a young man in a fur overcoat. "We owe our lives to this hobo who's probably hungry this minute . . . Now, aren't you?"

"I'm so empty I'm cavin' in, but this money'll buy me a grand feed," answered Red, swaying a little.

"Let 'im come right back to the diner," broke in the deep voice of the chef. "I'll fill 'im if he neveh eats ag'in! Chicken 'n' pie 'n' evehthing, if I pays for it mahself. I thinks a heap o' my own neck, I does."

"Chip in everybody and make it snappy, though there's time aplenty," declared the fur coated one, collecting as he followed.

Red hesitated at the luxurious car, but a hysterical crowd urged him, and the fragrance of food overcame him. A little chuckle came in his throat:

"Eat in a diner . . . Pinch me and see if I'm awake! Think of a handout without pannin' for it. Oh, gee!"

A laugh greeted this and several began suggesting foods to order, but he silenced them with a gesture. And did he rise to the occasion? He did. The true nephew of a traveling aunt. Accepting a fifty cent cigar, Red leaned back and ordered:

"Make the soup consomme, and the potatoes *au gratin,*" Red said pausing to grin at his audience. "And if your tenderloin steak with mushrooms tastes right, then I'll sample your fried chicken, seein' I'm on a diet and have got the money to pay for it if it runs above your treat limit."

"Ha, ha, ha! Go to it, bo, I'm for you strong," agreed the steward.

THE crowd scattered to finish interrupted meals and slyly watch the prodigious amount consumed by the tramp. A waiter stood at his elbow suggesting desserts, filling his cup. When the last morsel had disappeared, he was shown into the Pullman. Rising heavily, the hero paused to place something beside his plate. It was a half-dollar tip!

Disappointment awaited him in the Pullman. He found that distance lends enchantment; proximity, disillusionment. The chairs were soft, oh disgustingly soft, and all alike. Nothing under a man for solid support; he feared a fall. The porter invited him into another compartment to finish his cigar, but passengers protested. They plied him with questions and he mellowed and basked in the limelight. It was like a pleasant dream, and people were only human, after all.

But he could scarcely breathe; it was steamy. And when he started to raise a window, they said there was ventilation above. Outside, a crew was busy repairing the damage, and an hour passed as Red told of his travels and of driving piles for bridges, long ago.

"All aboard, a-ll aboard!" droned the conductor. "Only an hour lost and trains will wait to make connection with us. Tell that hobo they want to see him in Little Rock. I'm to bring him in."

"We've got him. He's all right," came a chorus as the whistle sounded and the Sunshine was safe on its journey once more instead of lying, a twisted and burning mass, down the embankment.

Fifteen minutes later found them at the Union Station calling cheery good-bys to Red, as he was escorted by the conductor up the long steps and finally into the manager's office where three officials waited. Together the engineer and conductor told of Red's bravery, while he blushed timidly.

"Honest if he didn't nearly make me run him down before I saw his signal . . . I was watchin' my gauge, at first . . . It sure jarred my nerves, but he saved our passengers with his little red hanky!"

Here the conductor took it up:

"Pretty cool about it too, chief, and never asked anything in return. Passengers chipped in with a little purse and the chef gave him a good dinner and we put him in the Pullman, like you said."

The chief nodded approval.

"That's good and the company wants to treat him right, too. We've talked the matter over, Mister—what's your name?" the chief asked, addressing Red.

"Never mind about my name. I'm only a tramp, but I've still got human feelings, and I didn't care if I couldn't clear the track, if it helped. I'm nothing to anyone." And he dismissed the thing in a gesture.

"Well, you've been valuable to this company in saving life and property. Is there any particular place you'd like to go? We want to give you a trip pass to any given point."

The hobo gasped. A trip—like other folks! Then he recalled the oozy seats, the close berths and heat of the coaches.

"If you please, I'd like to go to Florida —always wanted to, but put it off. Now I can't walk it. But instead of a ticket, I'd like money in some form so's I could ride in cabooses where they have good seats. And maybe I'd walk part of the way, leisure like and camp. I want my coffee percolated just four minutes——"

"So do I!" agreed the chief. Then he turned to his assistant:

"Make him out a second class ticket with stopovers, and give him a roll of tens." He stopped, counted the money himself and placed it in an envelope with a rubber band.

"Now, how'll this do?" he offered the parcel with the ticket.

Red's chin trembled as his lame hand groped for the gift.

"It's grand—grand! I never dreamed it could come true. My aunt went there," he said huskily. Then, with a wave which included them all, "May you and yours never know hunger and cold. May you always have a home—and a quiet place to die. God bless you! I'll be goin' now, thank you."

Something made the men bow their heads as in a cathedral, till the engineer blurted out:

"I hope I always do my duty as well as you."

OUTSIDE, in the switch yard two freight trains were being made up. Red spotted one for a local by its caboose, and approached the conductor, reading his yellow order sheet.

"How soon you pullin' out?" he asked boldly. "I want to travel."

The conductor regarded him with a frosty eye.

"No deadheads— Oh, you got a ticket? I thought you was——"

"I was, but I'm a real tourist now," grinned Red, unoffended.

"How come you don't ride the passenger? This ticket's good for it. We're out in ten minutes."

"I don't like the seats in them cars. I'll just step over to that corner drug store and get some liniment and be back time you start."

"You can catch us at the signal tower, then."

Red limped hurriedly out of the yards and made his purchase. Returning, he almost stumbled upon a slinking figure against the wall of the cut. Red instantly recognized a brother tramp.

"Travelin' north, pardner?" he asked.

"If I can slip in. You?"

"Goin' the other way. Got a ticket on the local."

News travels fast in the yards. The hobo ventured:

"Are you the guy that flagged the Sunshine and got a hatful o' money?"

"Yeh. And say, if you stop at the coal chute other side of Galla, you'll find Missouri Pete's gang. Tell 'em about Tennessee Red. That I'm tourin' Florida. Say that the jungle cat is goin' to the real jungle. Here's a dollar fer your trouble."

The local was creeping slowly by, and when its caboose came opposite, Tennessee Red swung aboard. He was headed south now.

Chester
MILD enough for anybody

What a cigarette meant there

Ten seconds to go—

and raw nerves fighting wearied muscles, driving them on into that fearful unknown beyond the wire. What man will *ever* forget the steadying solace of that last sweet stolen smoke?

What a cigarette means *here*

Two years to go—

the slow "ageing" by which tobaccos for Chesterfield lose all bite and harshness . . .

Mysterious, this chemistry of Nature! Endless rows of great hogsheads, stored away in darkness; choice tobacco, tightly packed . . . just waiting. And as if on signal, twice each year the leaf goes through a natural "sweat"—steeps in its own essences, grows mild and sweet and mellow.

Selected leaf, costly patience, endless care—that's what a cigarette means *here*. But right there is *exactly* the reason why Chesterfield means what it does to you!

Liggett & Myers Tobacco Co.

Millions of pounds of choice tobacco from each crop are stored away in great warehouses to "age."

field

. . . . *and yet* THEY SATISFY

Everybody's Meeting PLACE

Where writers, readers and the editor gather for informal discussion

THE MEN WHO MAN THE WORLD

THEY are a fine lot. I know them and I feel a brotherhood with them. They have virtues, and do not display them. They have faults, which I find it easy to condone. They are honest, hearty and handsome. Above all, they have courage. They are a splendid lot.

Outside my window I can see a rangy fellow in oil stained khaki overalls affixing a flag to the topmost point of the building he has been helping to complete. There is no ceremony, but there is pride. When he has gone his way, in another week or two, he will have left behind a monument to the work he has done, the risks he has taken. He has wrought dangerously with enduring steel, and we of the world are in his debt.

Beyond, on the waters of the harbor, a blunt nosed, sturdy little tramp steamer is getting under way, bound for the Narrows and the sea. On her decks tiny, dungaree clad figures move about their deliberate tasks. Already they have forgotten the great city that is over their shoulders. They have tasted its pleasures for a day, and had their fill. Now there is work to be done, man's work, and they must be about it.

Farther, as far off almost as the eye can see, a slender, glistening shape hovers over the New Jersey meadows. It is the *Los Angeles*, a thing of beauty in this generation as supremely lovely as the *Flying Cloud* in hers. In the cabins of that fragile craft men are busy. Since dawn they have been busy; watchful, vigilant, calculating. In their deft hands are life and death. They remember, but heed not, the fate of the tragic *Shenandoah*. There is man's work to be done, and they are about it.

I can see them constantly, from my office window and on the street and in many unexpected doorways. I see them in uniforms, in toil scarred clothes, in impeccable tailored garb. I know them anywhere, for there is a set to their shoulders, a gait to their walk, a quickness in their speech, that tells me who they are. Their thoughts are quick, their actions sure. Their laughter is ready. They are tolerant. They love life. They are a splendid lot.

They are, as William Watson put it perfectly:

> "The men whose joy is manning.
> The men who man the world. . . ."

THE BIGGEST DIAMOND EVER FOUND

IF YOU read the previous stories of E. VAN LIER RIBBINK in this magazine you are well aware of the author's intimacy with his homeland, the South African veld country. Here he gives a few more words about the fascinating material from which he wrought *The Ama-Zulu Diamond*.

—

King Dinizulu I have known personally. The last time I spoke to him was when he was brought to Pretoria a prisoner. He was the more or less innocent victim of his underchief's ambition, and the description of his character and policies is historically correct. You may

recall that I also introduced this rather tragic figure of the last King of the Zulus in a previous story that ran in EVERYBODY'S—*The Beast of the Bosveld*—in July, 1927.

Now as to that great diamond, "The Other Half of the Cullinan," around which the story revolves. As you know, the Cullinan is the largest diamond ever found—as big as a man's fist. I was among the first few white men that set eyes on it when first found, being at the time with the Transvaal Department of Agriculture of Pretoria, twenty-five miles from the spot where they picked up the stone. Immediately it was announced by experts that at one time the Cullinan (so named after Sir Thomas Cullinan, manager of the Premier mine, whom I also introduce in the story) had formed part of an even larger block of diamond and that the Cullinan was, in fact, the smaller half. What has actually become of the other half? *Quien sabe!* Whether it was blown to smithereens through natural forces, or whether it remains hidden in some unexpected pipe of blue earth, no one can tell. All of which makes it an all the more interesting subject of conjecture for the boys on the veranda of the Pretoria Club as they discourse over their whisky sodas. But, scientifically, it seems agreed that the Cullinan has, or had, a counterpart. Asscher of Amsterdam, who cut the Cullinan after the South African Government bought it for King Edward, is among those that support the theory.

As you know, the vaults of both De Beers and the Premier mine are full of diamonds. These stones are withheld from the market in order to prevent a glut. I have been through the vaults at Kimberley. In providing a place in these vaults for "The Other Half of the Cullinan," after having told the story of its wanderings, I believe that I offer a plausible solution and explanation.

The cloudburst on the veld, and the flood in the *donga* are based on a personal experience in northeastern Transvaal. So is the description of the veld fire. Dinizulu listening to litigants and the various hunting adventures are likewise founded on fact.

Cordially yours,
Ribbink

THE MAN FOR THE JOB

HERE is a case of frustrated ambition which fails to arouse in me the least spark of sympathy. The supply of potential dramatic critics is long, and that of good fiction far too short. The daunted one is CLEMENTS RIPLEY, author of that moving little story, *The Man For The Job*. Writing last summer he says:

I'm sorry to have let your letter go so long unanswered. We are just heading into the peach season down here and that is a time when correspondence suffers. As to my life history, here it is in brief.

I was born in Tacoma, Washington, where I spent a good part of my life up to the time I was fifteen. Tacoma was a rather good place in those days for a youngster of an inquiring turn of mind. The windjammer was still the cargo carrier of the Pacific and the waterfront was crowded with tall ships and peopled with easygoing sailormen who didn't mind answering innumerable questions. A lot that I picked up then has stayed with me. I seem to have a pretty good memory for anything useless or fantastic.

It was during this period that I decided that I wanted to write, chiefly, I think, because it seemed to be the only profession that didn't have anything to do with mathematics. I've often wondered how many people have taken up professions because they happened to have a violent antipathy to something else. As a matter of fact, my ambitions at this time tended towards dramatic criticism. Dramatic critics got free tickets to all the shows. It might be just as well to state right here that free tickets have always thrilled me, that I have always wanted to be a dramatic critic, and that I never have been one.

I went East to school when I was fifteen—the Taft School—where I stayed until I entered Yale. At neither place was I particularly distinguished for anything, but I did have a gorgeous time.

In 1916 I graduated from Yale for some reason. Nobody seemed to know exactly how it happened —myself least of all. You may or may not remember that that summer was the year of the Mexican Border troubles. I was a member of the Tenth Connecticut Field Artillery with the exalted rank of stable sergeant—the best job in the Army and I've tried everything from buck private to captain. We went up to Tobyhanna, Pa., where an epidemic of shipping fever and pneumonia among the horses kept us until fall. I thought I knew something about horses when I started, but I learned things up there that I wouldn't have believed—among other things the weight of a dead horse and the exact amount of time and sweat consumed in digging him a grave in solid rock.

While at Tobyhanna I took the examinations for a commission in the Regular Army, and who so astonished as I when I received a notice that I had suddenly become a second lieutenant of Field Artillery, U. S. A., the lowest ranking one in our service and probably in the world.

I was with my regiment, the 8th, at El Paso when the war broke out and was subsequently transferred to the 14th at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. I left the service in 1920 and came down to Samarcand, North Carolina, to raise peaches and write fiction, and have been doing both ever since.

If anybody happens to need a dramatic critic, white, sober and industrious, can also take care of the garden and drive the car, I wish they would let me know.

Sincerely,
Clements Ripley

MORE SCIENTERIFICS

YOU will probably recall the strange situation so vividly described by RAYMOND S. SPEARS in his recent Western story *Scienterific*. It was based on the occasion when coyotes were officially inoculated with rabies in a misguided attempt to wipe out the breed. Here is an amiable letter of appreciation from a reader who knows something about the matter.

I'm not a reg'lar reader of yo' magazine, but jist seen October 1928 issue. Long time since I read Spears. He is a helluva good feller on beasts and such. You know, this here yarn *Scienterific* ain't no damn lie either.

Well, sir, ten years ago, this'n Spears was up my way in Nevada and he met me and the boys at the mines, where this danged coyote tackled Ross Lynn. We was sittin' round the table playin' cards in the evenin' and Ross went out for water and the beast sprung at him. We run him to Salt Lake three hundred miles for Pasteur treatment and saved him. *That is gospel truth.*

Someone did inoculate the coyotes and they bit the cattle and sheep and raised hell in our country. I was a prospector up there and made money, too. I was all over hell's creation one way and another—ridin' horseback, mule, jitney and what have you and I know'd where the coyotes hid out and where they bred their pups and I never said yet they was as bad as some fellers thought. I know'd what they et; sheep now and ag'in, a calf maybe, but mostly rodents of the small kind what needed killin' and I didn't see no need of shootin' pizen inta them as they'd snap each other when matin' and spread the foamin' disease of hydrophobia all over the desert and hills.

How this danged Spears got all them facts is mor'n I'll ever know, but he was up there. Come campin' through and watchin' and one day by a spring, forty miles in the desert westerly from Ely, I run inta him and his wife and two boys. They was eatin' by the spring and he was watchin' when I come up and we got acquainted.

Dang smart feller, I know'd it at once, count of seein' so many minin' men and school teachers tryin' to be what they wasn't, but Spears wasn't like 'em a-tall. He didn't put on as he was anything special—jist listened.

He kinda smiled when I talked, satisfied like, and he once in an hour asked a leadin' question. And when I went to bring my cayuse to drink water, he up and wrote a lot of stuff in a book and snapped my picture when my back was turned out toward the brush.

I come back and talked two hours and kept 'em spite of their wantin' to go, cause I hadn't seen no humans for many days and bein' of a talkative nature I unloaded.

This ain't the first time this feller Spears has wrote about my country and told the truth. I'd like to know where he hangs out in case he ever tells a lie on us. I ain't ketched him yet, but I'm watchin' for his hangout.

I 'spect he's back up there in New York or Florida, playin' with a typewriter six hours a day. I don't care about that, only he keeps remindin' me of them days what I spent on the desert and makin' me damn homesick and if he don't stop it I'm a-goin' to write to him somewhere and tell him about it.

My Pa and Mum are still back up in Nevada and Utah ranches, and I go back every year and hike over them trails which seem to miss me and the coyotes ain't so many now but bigger and finer lookin' count of the rabies layin' 'em low and the big'ns only not dyin' and they bred their kind, so we've got a new coyote up there—a helluva big 'un and a rodent eater wholesale.

If you see Spears (or whatever his name ain't) jist tell him I'm watchin' for him to tell the first lie about my country, at what time I'll call him down in five languages; but he's cute and smart and don't 'zackly get twisted on the truth. How the hell he does find out the secrets of a feller and all his doin's in the camps and about them beasts—even to cleanin' their paws on dry sand and tellin' a feller to his face in the magazines how he has done and his life turned inside out—how he does is his biz' and my wonder, but he's got the dope straight.

Lorin Hall

I hardly feel called upon to explain that Spears is a resident of California, and that he knows the trails and ranges he writes about from first hand contact with them. Or that the name we know is his actual name. Or that I have yet to receive a letter from a reader contradicting a single fact he has ever used. His record for accuracy and the pains he takes to maintain it are both quite extraordinary indeed.

OVER THE HORIZON

WRITING from the *Chattanooga City,* which is his latest command, CAPTAIN GRAHAM THOMPSON spins a brief yarn about his career as windjammer sailor, steamship officer and author of tales of the sea. His first appearance here is with *Tops'l Haul* in this issue.

I was born on the bleak northeast coast of England, in a seaport town on the river Tyne not many miles from the Scottish border, and following the call of a long line of seafaring ancestors which can be traced back to the early whaling days, I set out to sea at the age of fifteen and now, after thirty years of making furrows in the seven seas, am still on active service.

Starting out as a deck boy in a full rigged ship in the days when a youngster received more kicks than wages, I worked my way up in the windjammers to ordinary seaman, A. B., bos'n and through the various licensed grades until I was chief mate of a twenty-three hundred ton four masted bark.

Then, working along the lines of a popular saying which showed the windjammer man's contempt for the steamboat sailor, I "knocked off going to sea and shipped in a steamer."

After some years in British vessels I came over to the United States, joined the Mercantile Marine, became a citizen and soon obtained a command which I still hold. My voyages take me around the world about every five months, out through the Panama Canal to Japan and China, down to the Malay Peninsula, India and Arabia, thence through the Suez Canal and back to the U. S. A.

My literary efforts really commenced through the urging of my relatives, who pronounced my letters from abroad to be so interesting in description and incidents as to make them offer the suggestion that I take up fiction writing. I began writing for pastime plus amusement, but it was not until some time after that my ambitions became serious and I sat down to write my first story for publication, which, much to my own surprise, was accepted!

Since then I have kept plodding along with results that have been most hopeful and encouraging, but owing to the thousand and one responsibilities of a shipmaster's life my writings at present are more or less spasmodic. I have, however, gathered enough raw material to keep me supplied for the rest of my life and live in hope that some day in the not far distant future—if the fates and editors are kind—I will be in a position to swallow the anchor and earn a livelihood by ink rather than by salt water.

Graham Thompson

ACCOLADE

HERE is an appreciation from headquarters for a novelette that was featured in our October issue. I pass it along to you with real satisfaction.

I was very much interested in Ared White's story in EVERYBODY'S, *Sons of Allah*, which took us to those days when the big job was on of making over and toning down the civilization in the Philippines.

Often I have wondered why so little was ever written about the romance and adventure of those stirring days, and I was genuinely interested in the yarn about the first Americans who took up the job of civilizing the Sulu Archipelago.

Many thought it ought to be done with a Krag rifle exclusively, and the idea of moral suasion was very trying at times. The natives had been used to the Spanish, and the Spanish believed in the iron hand. So the natives weren't able to understand us at all for a long time, until they found out we could be hard when necessary and when they murdered our men in cold blood.

As the Military Governor of Cebu, which is not remote from the setting of Ared White's story, I saw these problems and adventures first hand, and you may be sure I appreciate having those days, with their tropic glamour and romance, brought back to me. Far fetched as it may sound that an American officer would become a Mohammedan leader, or that an American would marry a Moro native, the same did occur. That was a part of the moral suasion that finally won out in the Islands. But even the Moros have finally become friendly and trustful of the once hated *gringo*.

Colonel T. R. Hamer
Formerly Military Governor of Cebu

A GLANCE AHEAD

THIS has been an exciting office recently. The first evidence of our activity comes to you with this issue. And the most prominent feature of it is the new cover. Prominent, that is, in that it is the first to meet the eye.

As a matter of fact, this cover is but a step toward the new magazine that has been coming to maturity during the past two years. EVERYBODY'S is shortly to present an appearance quite unlike any other publication in the field. As stated last month, no change in policy is contemplated with regard to the fiction. If you have enjoyed the magazine in the past, you will continue to do so. I feel confident, as a matter of fact, that you will enjoy it even more. In one year the readers of EVERYBODY'S have more than doubled in number, and that fact has simply encouraged us to turn out a magazine that will reflect with greater vividness the individual character we have slowly but surely achieved.

I can point with some pride at this moment to the list of authors who will contribute to EVERYBODY'S during the coming months. They are all well known to you, and the list excludes the many splendid stories which come from young writers whose reputations have not yet had time to catch up with their great talents. Look over these names, for instance:

Ared White
Robert Carse
E. S. Pladwell
Edgar Wallace
Hugh Pendexter
Dane Coolidge
Millard Ward
Georges Surdez
L. Patrick Greene
Raymond S. Spears
Robert E. Pinkerton
William West Winter
Allan Vaughan Elston
Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson

These names represent a collection of some of the best tales of glamor and action and sheer human interest being written today. They are in most cases stories written specially for EVERYBODY'S. Our plans look far ahead, and as one in whose custody a trust has been placed I promise you a newer EVERYBODY'S that will fulfill your keenest expectations.

WILLIAM CORCORAN

The NEWS *of* NEXT MONTH

PROOFS POSITIVE

by RAYMOND S. SPEARS

A thrilling novelette of a Western town that was terrorized by a ruthless and baffling murder conspiracy.

* * *

MALACCA *by T. T. FLYNN*

A long novelette of Malaysia, the story of an amazing piracy in the sinister waters of the Strait of Malacca.

* * *

A CORNER IN IVORY *by KELMAN FROST*

A stirring tale of Southwest Africa and the illicit traders of the Kaokoveld.

* * *

AND SEVEN SHORT STORIES

Among them "The Man Who Buried the Undertaker", by R. E. Hamilton, a Western story of whimsical good humor; "Not Kneeling", by Millard Ward, a gripping tale of waterfront pirates and a fighting mate; "Greased Brakes", by Barry Lyndon, an exciting story of the reckless racing motors. And a long instalment of Joel Rogers' splendid novel of the most feared spy of the Great War, "Secret Operative K-13".

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